

Chapter 4

Lying Bodies of the Enlightenment: Theory of Mind and Cultural Historicism

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“Creating an interaction” between cognitive psychology and literary criticism, writes Andrew Elfenbein, “requires constant, often skeptical translation across disciplinary boundaries.”¹ Such translation becomes particularly challenging when one tries to negotiate between subfields within these disciplines, whose grounding assumptions are expected to be incompatible. For example, there is now a tradition of productive interdisciplinary exchange between discursive psychology and narrative theory,² cognitive neuroscience and aesthetics,³ cognitive neuroscience and cognitive linguistics and cultural historicism,⁴ cognitive evolutionary psychology and ecocriticism,⁵ and conceptual mapping and postcolonial studies.⁶ By contrast, cognitive evolutionary psychology and cultural historicism seem to be destined to remain at odds.⁷ On the one hand, this is not surprising given the apparent conceptual gulf between viewing a particular behavior in the context of cognitive adaptations shaped by hundreds of thousands of years of evolution and viewing it as anchored firmly in a specific historical moment. On the other hand, a closer look suggests that there are areas of overlap between

the two, and that charting out those areas by using the navigation tools from both disciplines, might yield distinct interpretive advantages.

I became aware of these advantages as I was trying to make sense of a paradox underlying the representation of liars in eighteenth-century English fiction. While teaching the novels of Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, and Burney, I noticed that these writers treat body language as a pointedly unreliable source of information about the person's true state of mind, and yet they obsessively turn to the body as a privileged source of such information. Moreover, their readers apparently are not expected to view such behavior as strange or illogical; in fact, they may even feel disappointed—as my students often do—when protagonists fail to pay attention to the liars' gestures and facial expressions. In other words, writers and readers seem to tacitly agree that the body is simultaneously a highly valuable and quite unreliable source of information. How does this tacit agreement emerge and why it is culturally sustained in spite of its obvious inconsistency? What did they all “know” so well in the eighteenth century that they didn't even have to discuss and could take for granted in their dual view of the body? And if we still “know” it now, how do we acquire this knowledge?

In trying to answer these questions, I eventually turned to research in cognitive evolutionary psychology dealing with Theory of Mind (i.e., our propensity to interpret observable behavior in terms of hidden mental states). This proved to be beneficial on several counts. First, it offered me a framework for theorizing the paradoxical double view of the body in novels ranging from Eliza Haywood's *Love in Excess* (1719-20) and Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48) to Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Thomas Holcroft's *Hugh Trevor* (1794). Second, it made me ask questions about contemporary non-fictional

texts that I wouldn't have asked otherwise, tracing new connections between different cultural discourses of the long eighteenth century. Third, it turned out to be highly compatible with current research in performance studies. This was particularly important for me because as a cognitive literary critic I think that it is a sign of strength in a cognitive approach when it turns out to be congruent with well-thought-through literary and cultural criticism, and I eagerly seize on the instances of such compatibility. Given that the human mind in its numerous complex environments has been an object of study of literary critics for longer than it has been an object of study of cognitive scientists, I would, in fact, be suspicious of any cognitive reading so truly "original" that it can find no support in any of the existing critical paradigms.

The first part of this essay provides a brief overview of Theory of Mind, drawing on the work of evolutionary psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists. The second part spells out two key assumptions underlying my argument: first, that Theory of Mind is a "hungry" adaptation that constantly needs to process thoughts, feelings, and intentions, and, second, that the body occupies a perennially ambiguous position in relation to this cognitive hunger, figuring as both the best and the worst source of information about the mind. The third part shows how this ambiguity manifests itself in cultural narratives of *embodied transparency*, in which bodies are temporarily forced into functioning as direct conduits to mental states.⁸ Here I use a selection of eighteenth-century English novels to show how narratives that depicted the body as a site of performance and deceit counterbalanced fictional narratives that portrayed the body as a reliable source of information about a person's mind. The fourth part considers passages from Siddons's *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* and Austen's *Mansfield Park*

that constructed convincing social contexts for representing different degrees of embodied transparency within the same narrative frame.

1. Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind, also known as “mind-reading,” is a term used by cognitive psychologists and philosophers of mind to describe our ability to explain behavior in terms of underlying thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions. We attribute states of mind to ourselves and others all the time. Our attributions are frequently incorrect, but, still, making them is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment. When Theory of Mind is impaired, as it is in varying degrees in the case of autism and schizophrenia, communication breaks down.

Note that the words *theory* in Theory of Mind and *reading* in mind-reading are potentially misleading because they seem to imply that we attribute states of mind intentionally and consciously. In fact, it might be difficult for us to appreciate at this point just how much mind-reading takes place on a level inaccessible to our consciousness. For it seems that while our perceptual systems “eagerly” register the information about people’s bodies and their facial expressions, they do not necessarily make all that information available to us for our conscious interpretation. Think of the intriguing functioning of the so-called “mirror neurons.” Studies of imitation in monkeys and humans have discovered a “neural mirror system that demonstrates an internal correlation between the representations of perceptual and motor functionalities.”⁹ What this means is that “an action is understood when its observation causes the motor system

of the observer to ‘resonate.’” So when you observe someone else grasping a cup, the “same population of neurons that control the execution of grasping movements becomes active in [your own] motor areas.”¹⁰ At least on some level, your brain does not seem to distinguish between you doing something and a person that you observe doing it.

In other words, our neural circuits are powerfully attuned to the presence, behavior, and emotional display of other members of our species. This attunement begins early (since some form of it is already present in newborn infants) and takes numerous nuanced forms as we grow into our environment. We are intensely aware of the body language and facial expressions of other people, even if the full extent and significance of such awareness escape us. As social neuroscientists working with Theory of Mind speculate,

[Mirror] neurons provide a neural mechanism that may be a critical component of imitation and our ability to represent the goals and intentions of others. Although the early functional imaging studies have mostly focused on understanding how we represent the *simple actions* of others . . . , recent articles have proposed that similar mechanisms are involved in understanding the *feelings and sensations* of others. . . . The growing interest in the phenomenon of empathy has led to the recent emergence of imaging studies investigating sympathetic or empathetic reactions in response to others making emotional facial expressions or telling sad versus neutral stories. (Singer et al, xv-xvi)¹¹

Cognitive scientists thus begin to enter the territory that has been extensively charted by philosophers and literary critics exploring mimesis (from Aristotle’s *Poetics*,

David Hume's "Of Tragedy,"¹² and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* and Walter Kauffmann's *Tragedy and Philosophy*, to the recent rethinking of mimesis and performativity in the work of such scholars as Elin Diamond and Michael Taussig), phenomenology (such as George Butte's reintroduction of Maurice Merleau-Ponty into literary and film studies, *I Know That You Know That I Know*), and intentionality (such as Martha Nussbaum's critique of the tradition of correlating "an emotion and a discernible physical state"¹³). Although the work on mirror neurons is still in an early stage, one can see exciting possibilities emerging at the intersection of traditionally humanistic research and the inquiry into the neural basis of interpersonal subjectivity. I find it particularly encouraging that the cultural critics who have already taken advantage of the work on mirror neurons and intentionality have done it in the context of a historicist approach.¹⁴

2. Two Underlying Assumptions

Let me now spell out two assumptions underlying the present argument. First, I think of our cognitive adaptations for mind-reading as promiscuous, voracious, and proactive, their very condition of being a constant stimulation delivered either by direct interactions with other people or by imaginary approximations of such interactions (which include countless forms of representational art and narrative).

To clarify this point, it is useful to compare our adaptations for mind-reading with our adaptations for seeing. Because our species evolved to take in so much information about our environment visually, we simply cannot help seeing once we open our eyes in the morning,¹⁵ and the range of cultural practices grounded in the particularities of our

system of visual adaptations is truly staggering. Similarly, as cognitive evolutionary psychologist Jesse M. Bering observes, after a certain age, people “cannot turn off their mind-reading skills even if they want to. All human actions are forevermore perceived to be the products of unobservable mental states, and every behavior, therefore, is subject to intense sociocognitive scrutiny.”¹⁶ This means that although we are a far way off from grasping the full extent to which our lives are structured by our adaptations for mind-reading, we should be prepared that the cultural effect of those adaptations may prove just as profound and far-ranging as that of being able to see.

The second assumption is a paradox. We perceive people’s observable behavior as both a highly informative and at the same time quite unreliable source of information about their minds. This double perspective is fundamental and inescapable, and it informs all of our social life and cultural representations.

To begin to appreciate the power of this double perspective, consider the reason we remain suspicious of each other’s body language. When I am speaking to you, you count on my registering information conveyed by your face, movements, and appearance. That is, you can’t know what particular grin or shrug or tattoo I will notice and consider significant at a given moment (indeed, I don’t know either). Our evolutionary past ensures, however, that you will intuitively expect me to “read” your body as indicative of your thoughts, desires, and intentions. Moreover, the same evolutionary past ensures that I intuitively know that you expect me to read your body in this fashion. This means that I have to constantly negotiate between trusting this or that bodily sign of yours more than another. Were I to put this negotiation in words—which will sound funny because we do *not* consciously articulate it to ourselves in such a fashion—it might go like this: “Did she

smile because she liked what I said or because she wanted me to think that she liked what I said, or because she was thinking of how well she handled an argument yesterday, or was she thinking of something altogether unrelated?”

In other words, paradoxical as it may seem, we treat with caution the information about the person’s state of mind inferred from our observation of her behavior and body language precisely because we can’t help treating them as a highly valuable source of information about her mind—*and we both know it*. Because the body is *the* text that we read throughout our evolution as a social species, we are now stuck, for better or for worse, with cognitive adaptations that forcefully focus our attention on that particular text. (Nor would we want to completely distrust the body—our quick and far-from-perfect reading of each other is what gets us through the day.)

What all this adds up to is that we are in a bind. We have the hungry Theory of Mind that needs constant input in the form of observable behavior indicative of unobservable mental states. And we have the body that our Theory of Mind evolved to focus on in order to get that input. And that body—the object of our Theory of Mind’s obsessive attention—is a privileged and, as such, potentially misleading source of information about the person’s mental state.

Note how at this point the research on Theory of Mind complements our own discipline’s insight about the body as a site of performance. Because we are drawn to each other’s bodies in our quest to figure out each other’s thoughts and intentions, we end up *performing* our bodies (not always consciously or successfully) to shape other people’s perceptions of our mental states. A particular body thus can be viewed only as a

time-and-place-specific cultural construction—that is, as an attempt to influence others into perceiving it in a certain way.

Cognitive evolutionary research thus lends strong support to theorists in cultural studies who seek to expand the meaning of performativity, such as Joseph Roach, who argues that performance, “though it frequently makes references to theatricality as the most fecund metaphor for the social dimensions of social production, embraces a much wider range of human behaviors. Such behaviors may include what Michel de Certeau calls ‘the practice of everyday life,’ in which the role of spectator expands into that of participant.”¹⁷ Indeed, one point that work on Theory of Mind brings home forcefully is that our everyday mind-reading turns each of us into a performer and a spectator, whether we are aware of it or not.

Mediating between cognitive evolutionary psychology and cultural studies thus has both interpretive and methodological implications. We can now analyze various cultural institutions and social practices as both reflecting our need to attribute intentionality *and* remaining subject to the instabilities inherent to our mind-reading processes. This analysis would amplify the view of Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt that the body always “functions as a kind of ‘spoiler’ . . . baffling or exceeding the ways in which it is represented,”¹⁸ by grounding this view in our evolutionary heritage. Because ours is a mind-reading and hence endlessly performative species, there is no lasting, reliable escape from the double perspective on the body.

But even as the research on Theory of Mind begins to explain why the body remains both a privileged and an unreliable source of information about the mind, what it cannot explain is why this double view manifests itself differently in different historical

circumstances. This is where cultural critics come in with their expertise on specific social milieus, ideologies, aesthetic stakes, and personal histories.

3. Lying Bodies

Using the cognitive perspective outlined above, I can thus make two predictions about the treatment of the body in the Enlightenment. First, I can say that the desire to revalorize the body as the true source of information about a person's mind must have assumed different forms throughout the century. Second, I can say that these attempts at stabilizing the meaning of the body must have remained relatively short-lived, unreliable, and open to subversion.

Note, however, that this dual claim can be applied to *any* period. Hence we need to draw on our knowledge of specific milieus, in my case, eighteenth-century England, to see what unique cultural forms such attempts to tame the body may take. Moreover, these forms do not emerge out of thin air (even if our cognitive heritage makes us particularly susceptible to casting about for sure ways to read the body); they have a concrete cultural history. And reconstructing that history necessarily takes one outside the immediate literary text or genre under consideration. A cultural historicist analysis is thus the logical continuation of an inquiry that has started with, and remains to a significant extent structured by, a cognitive claim.

Consider the “novels of amorous intrigue”¹⁹ of Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley, and Eliza Haywood that depicted the torrid love affairs of English, French, and Italian aristocrats. From a cognitive point of view, these novels create one specific context in

which the body *can* have a reliably recognizable vocabulary. For example, when the protagonists of Haywood's *Love in Excess* (1719-20) fall in love, they can barely control their body language; their sighs, blushes, and confusion (66-67), their tears and ravings (155), their trembling, panting, and raging (175) offer the reader a pleasurable fantasy in which every state of the amorous mind has its unmistakable bodily expression.

How transparent are those expressions to other characters in the novel? On some occasions they can certainly read the amorous bodies well enough. Thus when Count D'elmont looks into the eyes of his adored Melliora, he discovers there "what most he wished to find," for, as we learn,

Ambition, envy, hate, fear, or anger, every other passion that finds entrance in the soul, art and discretion may disguise, but love, tho' it may be feigned, can never be concealed; not only the eyes (those true and most perfect intelligencers of the heart) but every feature, every faculty betrays it! It fills the whole air of the person possess'd with it; it wanders round the mouth! plays in the voice! trembles in the accent! and shows it self in a thousand different, nameless ways! Even Melliora's care to hide it, made it more apparent, and the transported D'elmont not considering . . . who might be a witness of his rapture, could not forbear catching her in his arms, and grasping her with an extasie, which *plainly* told her what his thoughts were. (101; emphasis added)

The novel of amorous intrigue carefully foregrounds such moments, making them seem normative rather than exceptional: In the world of D'elmonts and Mellioras, bodies appear to speak *plainly*.

Still, the narrative repeatedly subverts this strong claim about the transparency of the body in love. *Love in Excess* features numerous situations in which male and female bodies traverse the alphabet of love—from blushing to weeping—but their interlocutors (often the objects of those passions) fail to interpret them correctly. Among such situations, I would like to single out one in which Violetta, another woman in love with the irresistible D’elmont, does the requisite amount of blushing (241), growing pale, weeping, and fainting (245), but because she is disguised as a male page, D’elmont remains oblivious to the meaning of her body language. Violetta’s cross-dressing adventure feels both artificial and touching. It draws on the conventions of traditional romance, on Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and, to some degree, on the late-seventeenth-century fashion of attending the theater masked and on the continuous popularity of masquerades. Still, note how this contrived plot turn is used to bolster the commonsensical intuition of the instability of our mind-reading practices. Ironically, the fancy vocabulary of the genre (disguises are common in the novel of amorous intrigue) is thus used to undercut the attempt to establish the “plain” vocabulary of the body.

What came to be known as the “sentimental” novel of the 1740s-1770s represents yet another endeavor to construct a context in which one can read and trust the body. Here, the emergence of the body as the direct conduit to the mind is accomplished by simultaneously elevating the observer and denigrating the spoken word. Samuel Richardson insisted in a private letter that “Air and Attention will shew Meaning beyond what Words can, to the Observing” (*Selected Letters*, 68). And indeed, in *Pamela* (1740), as John Mullan points out, “mutually affecting looks [awaken] contagious tears,” and “attention to the meaning of looks and gestures” binds the members of a social group

together. The focus on the body is powerful because it “punctures or interrupts [deceitful] speech.”²⁰

But no discourse that builds up the body as the portal to perfect mutual knowledge will remain unmolested for long. Richardson’s next novel, *Clarissa* (1747-48), features a heroine supremely attuned to the body language of her admirer but faring much worse for her trust in these “wordless meanings.” When Clarissa’s friend, Anna Howe, confesses, upon getting Clarissa’s account of what transpired between herself and Lovelace, that she cannot deduce Lovelace’s intentions from his words (“What can the man mean?”), she implores her correspondent to be “vigilant” (451). Clarissa’s “vigilance” centrally features her ability to interpret her amorous persecutor’s gaze. “We are both great watchers of each other’s eyes,” she observes in reply to Anna (460).

Yet Clarissa pays a heavy price for reading people’s hearts in their eyes. Here, for example, is Lovelace, begging “with a very serious air” for Clarissa’s moral guidance and claiming that it is his “belief that a life of virtue can afford such pleasures, on reflection, as will be for ever blooming, for ever new!” We as readers may wince or snicker at his attempt to play the stereotypical role of reformed rake. Not so Clarissa. She is “agreeably surprised.” She looks “at him . . . as if [she] doubted [her] ears and [her] eyes!—His features and aspect, however, [become] his words” (443). Clarissa gets the bodily testimony and falls for it. Poor dupe.

But what choice does she have, trapped as she is in a cultural discourse both dedicated to reclaiming the body as the portal to the mind and unable to shake off complications inherent to our mind-reading processes? Consider the protagonists of Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) who do not share Clarissa’s obsession with others’ body

language and see if *they* fare any better. Fielding's novel contains a number of scenes in which the sympathetic protagonists fail to register the body language of various liars, the language that, as the narrative teasingly implies, can reveal those men's secrets, if only properly attended to. Of course, this teasing promise is false, but it gets the readers worked up about the certain lack of observation on the part of favorite characters who really *should* pay more attention to the facial expressions of the lying fiends who converse with them.

Think, for example, of Mr. Allworthy's heartfelt "sermon" about love as "the only foundation of happiness in a married state" (62) and Doctor Blifil's attempts to refrain from laughing as he listens to the good man whom he and his infernal brother have just imposed upon. We are told that it cost the doctor "some pains to preserve now and then a small discomposure of his muscles" (63), and we infer that Allworthy remains oblivious to these half-smothered facial contortions. Of course, one may suggest that Allworthy is smarter than he appears and that he is, in fact, at least partially aware of the doctor's double game, but it seems to me that such a generous take on Allworthy is the direct result of Fielding's manipulation of his audience. We are exasperated by Allworthy's failure to register the doctor's countenance: Were he to pause, if only for a second, in the middle of his eloquent speech and take a closer look at the doctor's grimacing mug, surely he would intuit that something is wrong.

As a matter of fact, he wouldn't, for as we have already seen in *Clarissa*, "features and aspect" can be interpreted in a broad variety of ways. Still, note how assiduously the novel cultivates the view of the body as a potential bearer of true information even as it simultaneously undercuts this view.

Here is another, similar scene. During his journey to London, Tom comes across his old Gloucester acquaintance, Mr. Dowling, the lawyer, and the two men sit down to a bottle of wine. When Dowling learns of Tom's poor opinion of Blifil and tells Tom that "it is a pity such a person should inherit the great estate of your uncle Allworthy," Tom's reply makes it clear that he does not know about Bridget's deathbed confession. As Dowling listens to Tom's earnest professions that he has never thought himself entitled to any part of Allworthy's estate and realizes that the young man in front of him has been cheated out of his family and fortune, his body language displays both his shock and his discomfort at the thought of what a heinous crime he has been made an accomplice to. Of course, Dowling endeavors "to hide" his feelings from Jones "by winking, nodding, sneering, and grinning" (576), and, again, readers are made to feel frustrated by Tom's failure to notice the lawyer's strange body language and to ask himself what could have prompted it. The trap that Fielding prepares for the readers—and the one that we are only too ready to tumble into—is the illusion that by registering Dowling's body language Tom might have intuited something about the true state of affairs in his family, which is, of course, the same illusion that Anne Howe and Clarissa Harlowe share when they think that by vigilantly observing Lovelace's body language one can figure out his "real" thoughts and intentions.

We encounter a similar pattern of the body as both profoundly informative and profoundly misleading in Thomas Holcroft's novel *The Adventures of Hugh Trevor* (1794). Holcroft's narrative prominently features the strange relationship between the idealistic young protagonist, Hugh Trevor, and a charming older man known to Trevor as Mr. Belmont and considered by him a good friend and an altogether "delightful

companion” (223). In truth, however, Belmont is a fiend who has long lost his credit in the world and has to survive by adapting false identities and swindling trusting strangers. Earlier in the story, Belmont, using his real name, Wakefield, married Trevor’s own widowed mother and proceeded to defraud her of all her money. He is now poised to lay claim on the rest of Trevor’s inheritance, an endeavor that would leave Trevor completely destitute. Having never met his evil stepfather face-to-face, Trevor has no way of knowing that Belmont and Wakefield are the same person. He thus routinely shares with Belmont all news about Wakefield and discusses with him his plans of thwarting the designs of the grasping villain, which, of course, has the effect of putting him even more in Wakefield’s power.

During one such scene, “impatient to unburden [his] heart,” Trevor hurries Belmont away from the gambling table, takes him to the park, and shows him the letter from his lawyer, which informs Trevor of Wakefield’s new plans of defrauding him. As the false Belmont reads the letter, Trevor observes that he is “more than once violently tempted to laugh.” As he hands the letter back to Trevor, Belmont is visibly “restraining his titillation,” but the effort finally proves too difficult, and, unable to “contain himself” longer, he bursts “into a violent fit of laughter.” Understandably astonished “at the mirth so ill placed and offensive,” Trevor asks what it means (220-21). Belmont hastily invents an explanation that both misleads his young friend and makes him delighted with Belmont’s “flow of spirits and raillery” (223).

Here, then, are questions that I had no way of answering (*would you?*) had I relied only on traditional theories available to literary critics and ignored the research on Theory of Mind: Why turn to that lying body again and again? Why pay attention to the language

of the eyes? Why register that blushing cheek? Why feel disappointed when characters such as Allworthy or Tom fail to observe the strange facial contortions of doctor Blifil and lawyer Dowling? *Let* them ignore those contortions! Let Clarissa ignore Lovelace's "feature and aspect"! Let Hugh Trevor ignore Belmont's visible attempts to restrain his titillation! A protagonist might be better off blind, for registering those half-averted eyes, blushing cheeks, and strangely pursed mouths does not help him to realize that he is dealing with a liar; on the contrary, it makes him more vulnerable to the liar's subsequent crafty interpretation of his involuntary "winking, nodding, sneering, and grinning."

The research on Theory of Mind thus helps me to make sense of the stubborn overprivileging of body language by eighteenth-century fictional protagonists as well as their readers. Their collective cultural experience (which included fictional narratives) no less than their daily social experience must have taught them to remain wary and to distrust appearances, but experience cannot *fully* override our cognitive propensity to "trust" the language of the eyes and of the body, neither then nor now. Nor would we really want them to override it, given that people's bodies and facial expressions do speak to our minds and bodies in numerous ways, many of which we are not even aware of (as the research on "mirror neurons" demonstrates). Because our evolved cognitive repertoire includes adaptations that attribute mental states based on people's body language, we must constantly negotiate a path between our habitual recourse to that language and the realization that the body often deceives. The tension between our impulse to credit what we perceive and our hard-won skepticism regarding the truth of bodily display remains endlessly productive—a rich source of new representations and cultural renegotiations.²¹

But the story only begins here. True, I have now a provisional answer to my starting question about the paradoxical position of the body in eighteenth-century fiction: Fictional narratives built on readers' daily mind-reading anxieties by forcing their protagonists (Clarissa, Tom Jones, Hugh Trevor) to rely on their interpretations of other people's bodies precisely at the moments when these people (Lovelace, Dowling, Belmont) were set to deceive them. Moreover, I can argue now that *Tom Jones*, *Clarissa*, and *Hugh Trevor* figured as counterpoints to ongoing novelistic attempts to construct the body as the true source of information about the mind. In other words, for every "plainly" speaking body from *Love in Excess*, *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), *The Man of Feeling* (1771), or *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) there is a deceiving body from *Tom Jones*, *Clarissa*, *Cecilia* (1782), *Hugh Trevor*, or *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). To adapt Greenblatt's much-quoted phrase, these latter novels reminded their readers that there is a plainly speaking body, no end to such wonderful transparency, only not for them.²²

But eighteenth-century novels did more than just contrast the lying and plainly speaking bodies. They also constructed continuums of embodied transparency—when the same scene features multiple characters *ranging* in their relative readability. And because the example that I consider below (Austen's *Mansfield Park*) evokes the stage in order to construct such a range, we must first see how the double view of the body manifested itself in the period's theatrical discourse.

4. Acting Bodies

In 1807, Henry Siddons published a book, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, a translation from German of Johann Jacob Engel's *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (1785), significantly revised to reflect the conventions of "the English drama." At one point, to illustrate what he calls "the communicative power of gesture" (36), Siddons treats the reader to the following scene:

When a person sits at the theatre, after having seen a play acted three or four times, his mind naturally becomes vacant and inactive. If among the spectators he chances to recognize a youth, to whom the same is new, this object affords him, and many others, a more entertaining fund of observation than all that is going forward on the stage.

This novice of an auditor, carried away by the illusion, imitates all he sees, even to the actions of the players, though in a mode less decisive. Without knowing what is going to be said, he is serious, or contented, according to the tone which the performers happen to take. His eyes become a mirror, faithfully reflecting the varying gestures of the several personages concerned.

All humour, irony, anger, curiosity, contempt, in a word, all the passions of the author are repeated in the lines of his countenance. This imitative picture is only interrupted whilst his proper sentiments, crossing exterior objects, seek for modes of expressing themselves. (35-36)

What interests me in this scene is the implicit contrast between the "reality" of emotions as they are portrayed on stage and as they are mirrored by the unsophisticated

observer. For note that nobody in this tableau apparently experiences the real feelings of “ill humour, irony, anger, curiosity [or] contempt.” The actors merely put on a show of those emotions. The “youth” unselfconsciously mimics their body language, but does it mean that he is *really* angry or contemptuous at this point? I doubt it. However much I may fear and hate a psychopathic murderer from a movie, those feelings are *nothing* compared to what I would experience were I to encounter such a person in real life. In this respect, the body of Siddons’s impressionable “youth” is as unreliable an index to his true feelings as the acting bodies on stage are to theirs.

However, this weak version of ill humor, irony, or anger is not *all* that animates our young man. He feels something else—and very deeply, too—and that something else is plainly written all over his body. *It is his engagement with what he sees on stage.* The smile of contempt that momentarily curls his lips as he watches the actress stare down the double-dealing villain thus expresses not so much any actual contempt on his part but rather his deep involvement with the performance: his complete surrender to the power of the actors.

If we focus on this particular aspect of the young man’s feelings, it means that at least for the duration of this episode, his body language reflects his state of mind more accurately than the body language of the performers reflects their state of mind. He is completely taken by what happens on stage, and because he is not faking that state of deep emotional engagement for the benefit of the observer (for he does not know that he is being observed), his unpremeditated show of feelings becomes more engrossing for the theatergoer than the official show of feelings put on by the actors.

To understand what is at stake in the description of the hypothetical spectator attracted by the display of true feelings off the stage, let us take a brief look at the Enlightenment's obsession with the question of whether the actors really feel the emotions they portray. This obsession took different forms throughout the century. First, there were continuous debates about the effect that the regular displays of fear, hatred, treacherousness, or amorous dissipation must have on the moral characters of the actors. Thus the anonymous *The Advantages of Theatrical Entertainment Briefly Considered* (1772) expressed the enduring public suspicion that one cannot *embody* feelings and yet remain unaffected by them:

These gentlemen [actors] arrive at a pitch of virtue, to which few, who are employed in speculation, attain to: they reduce theory to practice. The delusive scenes of love exhibited on the stage are performed by them in real life.²³

Samuel Johnson begged to differ. As he saw it, "If Garrick really believed himself to be that monster, Richard the Third, he deserved to be hanged every time he performed it." Roger Pickering steered a tentative middle course. While observing that "the Delicacy of Theatrical Expression can never be expected from an Actor that not *feel* his Part," he devoted most of his influential *Reflections upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy* (1755) to "general instructions on the artificial management of the body and the voice."²⁴ Feeling the part might have been important but learning how to fake the feeling was a surer way to success.

Hence another aspect of eighteenth-century preoccupation with acting bodies: treatises on acting theory as a science, including comparisons of the oratorical skills of actors and actresses with those of other professional speakers, such as lawyers, clergymen, and politicians. Traditionally grounded in the works of Quintilian (particularly his *Education of an Orator*, ca. 95 AD), publications on elocution and body language expanded throughout the century to include the natural-philosophical discussions of representable passions as well as the debates about the “natural” and “national” art of gesture. Siddons included sixty-nine illustrations in his book, ranging from “Pride” to “Obsequious Attention” as he discussed postures presumably capturing the essence of each passion, and he was working within a well-established tradition. We can trace this tradition to John Bulwer’s *Chirologia; or the Natural Language of the Hand* (1644), Charles Gildon’s *The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton* (1710), Samuel Foote’s *A Treatise on Passions, So far as they Regarded on Stage* (1747), Aaron Hill’s *An Essay on the Art of Acting* (1753), Paul Hiffernan’s *Dramatic Genius* (1770), Gilbert Austin’s *Chironomia; or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* (1806), and many others.

Thus, if we want to deduce a consensus from the eighteenth-century publications on actors and acting, it would go like this. The gap between the body language of the performer and his or her true feelings can be large (Garrick *never* feels like Richard the Third!), negligible (“these gentlemen” cannot shake off their amorous stage selves even as they step out of their roles) or middling (actors should “feel” their parts, whatever that may mean), but *there is always a gap*. That’s where Siddons is coming from, and if we look at his tableau again, we realize that he is additionally emphasizing the “fake” nature of the sentiment portrayed on stage by mentioning casually that this is the third or fourth

time that the spectator is seeing the play. Surely, even if we envision an actress working herself up to burning with real “anger, curiosity, or contempt,” realizing that she is doing it the fourth night in a row takes away some of our belief in the reality of her feelings.

Moreover, our “novice of an auditor” is not faking anything. There is no gap between his feeling enthralled by the play and embodying that enthrallment. Note too, his tender age. Youth was sometimes foregrounded in discourses that created contexts in which emotions were transparent.²⁵ Coming back to the sentimental novel and its valiant attempts to carve a zone of certainty in our daily mind-reading, witness the narrator of Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762) explaining that parents and preceptors can successfully control young people if they unobtrusively observe their body language:

As long as the young man does not think of dissembling and has not yet learned how to do it, with every object one presents to him one sees in his manner, his eyes, and his gestures the impression it makes on him. One reads in his face all the movements of his soul. By dint of spying them out, one gets to be able to foresee them and finally to direct them. (226)

The voyeuristic pleasure of Siddons’s experienced theatergoer is thus grounded in the eighteenth-century cultural discourses that constantly reweighed the relative emotional transparency of variously socially situated bodies. The paradigmatically suspect body on stage (moreover, one that has already been on that stage for quite a while—not the youngest body, perhaps) is contrasted with the young body that one can “spy out” and almost “direct,” for the “youth” does not know what new emotion will convulse him in

the coming second, while the observer, having seen the play three or four times, knows it quite well.

Siddons succeeds in building a compelling moment of embodied transparency in the least expected setting, the theater. Of course, this setting also ensures that the moment will not last: the “youth” is in thrall now, but the spell will be broken any second. The voyeuristic tableau thus plays with our double view of the body as the best and the worst source of information about the person’s mind by teasing us with a vision of a highly readable body in an environment (i.e., the theater) that thrives on cultivating the gap between the body and the mind.

There is more to it, however. The theatrical setting allows Siddons to construct something like a continuum of embodied transparency. First, there is a body on stage, with its deliciously ambiguous discrepancy between actual feelings and their representation. Second, there is a “youth” in the audience whose body delivers direct access to his mind. Third, there is a pleasing (if not necessarily conscious) awareness on the part of the older spectator of his own mind-reading “connoisseurship”: He can contemplate the difference between the clearly compelling (for the younger spectator is so taken by it!) portrayal of feelings on stage and even more compelling portrayal of feelings in the audience. He decides which show of feeling to enjoy at a given moment while he himself remains impervious to prying eyes. (Which is, of course, an ironic illusion, given that as he sits there savoring his position as an ultimate observer, the reader observes *him*.)

So perhaps it is not a coincidence that when a novel endeavors to construct a continuum of embodied transparency, it turns to theater. In *Mansfield Park* (1814), when

Sir Thomas comes back from Antigua in the middle of his children's rehearsals, there is a moment when he steps into the billiard room and finds "himself on the stage of a theatre, and opposed to a ranting young man"—Mr. Yates, who is going over his role. Tom Bertram enters at the same time "at the other end of the room" and just catches the expression of "solemnity and amazement" on his father's face and the "gradual metamorphosis of the impassioned Baron Wildenhaim into the well-bred and easy Mr. Yates," which all adds up to "such an exhibition, such a piece of true acting as [Tom] would not have lost upon any account" (164). Like Siddons's experienced theatergoer, Tom finds himself in the position of an observer who can appreciate the range of performed and real emotions—from Yates's ranting performance of the baron's anxiety followed by the assumption of the properly "easy" air of a gentleman to Sir Thomas's sincere surprise. Also, like Siddons's theatergoer, Tom—an avid and appreciative spectator—is himself observed by the reader.

It is not that Siddons and Austen were the first to discover the discursive territory that lies between the two apparent opposites, the bodies that lie (Lovelace, Dowling, and Belmont) and the bodies that speak "plainly" (Melliora and Emile): That territory had been charted out by treatises on decorum and performed social "sincerity,"²⁶ going back at least as early as *The English Theophrastus* (1702). Their particular achievement was to construct compelling social contexts in which whole spectrums of embodied performativity were present simultaneously, in the same narrative "frame,"²⁷ so to speak.

Staying within traditional disciplinary boundaries, we can consider this achievement either in "cognitive" terms (as particularly titillating to our Theory of Mind, ever-primed to look for a correspondence between body language and state of mind), or

in literary-historical terms (as opening a new, rich vein in the representation of fictional subjectivity²⁸). However, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout my essay, there is no neat separation between the two: The cognitive, to borrow from Patrick Colm Hogan, is “instantiated variously, particularized in specific circumstances”²⁹; the literary-historical derives its appeal from experimenting with the double view of the body, grounded in our cognitive evolutionary heritage, and constructing plausible contexts in which bodies appear legible or the conditions of their illegibility are specified (e.g., Garrick *pretends* to feel like Richard the Third; Yates *assumes* the air of a gentleman as befits his social class and education). But if the separation between the two approaches begins to feel forced, perhaps we should not insist on imposing it. After all, at least at this point, cognitive evolutionary psychology and cultural historicism engage with the same problem. To “translate” from the studies in Theory of Mind “into” cultural studies, both fields want to know why and how bodies perform minds.

¹ Elfenbein, 484.

² See Herman, this volume.

³ See Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, Starr, this volume.

⁴ See Crane, *Shakespeare's Brain* and “Fair is Foul.” See also Hart, “Embodied Literature.”

⁵ See Easterlin, “Cognitive Ecocriticism.”

⁶ See Hogan, *Empire and Poetic Voice* and Aldama, “Race, Cognition, and Emotion.”

⁷ For a discussion, see Alan Richardson, “Studies in Literature,” 12-14.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of embodied transparency, see Zunshine, *How To Make Us Think*.

⁹ Borenstein and Ruppin, 229.

¹⁰ Rizzolatti et al, 662.

¹¹ See also Goldman for a detailed discussion of relationship between mirror neurons and Theory of Mind, and Ramachandran for a discussion of anosognosia (38) and autism (119) as possibly associated with damage in the system of mirror neurons.

¹² For a related discussion of Hume's analysis of "reflected" sensations, see Armstrong, 12.

¹³ Nussbaum, 96.

¹⁴ See Spolsky, *Word vs. Image* and Stafford, "Romantic Systematics."

¹⁵ Unless, of course, our visual system is severely damaged.

¹⁶ Bering, 12.

¹⁷ Roach, 46.

¹⁸ Gallagher and Greenblatt, 15.

¹⁹ Warner, xii.

²⁰ Mullan, 61.

²¹ Note, too, that, as Gabrielle Starr observes, "Even if we, as savvy readers and critics are on guard against fallacies of sincerity, we do well to note that being taken in—or at least along—by expectation and illusion is part of the pleasure of art, and the strategy of artists" (*Lyric Generations*, 219n14).

²² "There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us." (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 65)

²³ Quoted in West, 13.

²⁴ Quoted in Wasserman, 265.

²⁵ As Porter Abbott suggests, the eighteenth-century cultural discourse on youth as a state of transparency was complemented by the discourse of “innocence”—frequently associated with but not limited to, youthful protagonists. We can trace, he maintains, “the cultural need to maintain the idea of innocence as by definition incapable of distrusting appearances. Such innocence is meant to be part of Squire Allworthy’s nature, and Tom’s, and consequently keeps them from sensing deception. It’s such an important 18th-century issue that *Pamela* was written in part to address the problem—to make a convincing case for ‘conscious innocence’” (“Reader’s Report”).

²⁶ As *The English Theophrastus* puts it, “Sincerity is the disclosing and opening of one’s Heart: This is hardly to be found in anybody; and what we commonly look upon to be so, is only a more cunning and shrewd sort of Dissimulation, to insinuate our selves into the Confidence of other People. . . . Half-witted People can never be sincere” (334).

²⁷ For a discussion of narrative “frames” within a cognitive perspective, see Emmott, 158.

²⁸ For a discussion of Austen’s use of theater to introduce “the subjectivity of private experience into the novel,” see Marshall, 198, 237, and Cohn, 115. See also Tanner for the related analysis of “acting” and “role-playing” (162) in *Mansfield Park* and Gay for the analysis of Julia Bertram’s “fine dramatic entry” (98).

²⁹ Hogan, “Literary Universals,” this volume.