Socionics as Reverie

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An argument about Obama

This morning a thread in a socionics group on Facebook turned into an argument over Barack Obama. One participant set out, point by point, why they had concluded he was an LIE and not an EIE. Another simply replied that he was an IEI. No reasons, just a verdict.

I happen to agree with the IEI verdict. But I would never have offered it like that. For me the explanation is the main thing. The three letters at the end are only its title.

That reaction set me thinking about what a typing actually is. Is it a discovery about Obama, like his blood group? A hypothesis waiting for a test? Or something closer to the way we read a character in a novel? This essay is my answer: socionics is a form of reverie. It's an imaginative, meaning-making practice, and it should be judged as one, not as a failed attempt at science. That doesn't make every typing as good as any other. It changes what "good" means, and it explains why the explanation matters more than the verdict.

Not a blood group

Tell me someone's blood group and you've told me a fact about their body. A lab settles it, and argument won't change it. A socionic type is a different kind of claim. It doesn't measure. It characterises.

The clearest way to see this is to type someone who doesn't exist. Nobody believes Mr Darcy is real. Yet if I announced that Darcy was an ESE, you would tell me I was wrong, and you'd be right. An ESE reads the mood of a room, lifts it, and is happy to lead it. Darcy arrives at the Meryton assembly, refuses to dance, and remarks within Elizabeth's hearing that she is "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me". The novel is against me.

So a character can be unreal and a reading of him can still be poor. The useful line doesn't run between real and imagined. It runs between readings that answer to something, here Austen's text, and readings that answer to nothing.

The character we weave

With a real person, what we type is also a character: the one we build from whatever we've seen of them. We never meet Obama's psyche directly. We meet speeches, interviews, photographs, anecdotes and memoirs, and from these the mind weaves a figure. That figure is what we type.

Paul Ricoeur gave this a philosophical footing in his 1971 essay "The Model of the Text". Once an action is done, he argued, it detaches from its agent, much as a written text detaches from its author. It enters the public world and becomes something others interpret. Human action can be read, and read well or badly.

We do the same with ourselves, and here there's no escape hatch. A life story isn't a rough draft of some scientific account of the self, waiting to be corrected by better data. It is narrative through and through, and couldn't be anything else. Treating autobiography as a failed investigation of objective fact is a category error, like marking a poem for its accuracy as a weather report. When I call myself an LII, I'm not reporting a measurement. I'm telling the story of my life in a particular vocabulary, and asking whether it's the story that makes most sense of me.

Three texts at once

Every typing interprets at least two things together: the person, and the model. You can misread Darcy. You can just as easily misread what an ESE is. Someone who thinks ESE means "polite, proper and socially correct" might find Darcy's stiff formality a decent fit. From outside, the two mistakes look identical.

Donald Davidson made this point about language in general, in "Radical Interpretation" (1973). When someone says something that looks false, you can't tell at once whether they believe something false or mean something different by their words. Belief and meaning have to be worked out together. When one person calls Obama an EIE and another finds that absurd, they may disagree about Obama. Just as often they disagree about what "EIE" means.

Socionics adds a third text, and this is where it becomes interesting in its own right: the typer. Socionics itself tells us that people read people differently. The ethical types are supposed to be at home reading the inner life of others, their moods, loyalties and motives, and less at home fitting that life into a formal system like socionics. So they may read the person well and the model loosely. The logical types are supposed to be the

reverse: comfortable with the detached, external model, less comfortable with the involved, lived experience of another person. So they may apply the model rigorously to a person they have misread.

The typer's own type therefore enters the story being woven about Obama. So does their manner of typing. One person builds an argument, step by step. Another jumps straight to the verdict. Both are acts of character, and a reader of the thread is reading them as well as Obama. Every typing is also a small self-portrait of the typer.

It follows that agreement proves less than we'd like. A group that shares a distorted picture of a type, or a shared blind spot, will apply it consistently, agree with each other, and still be reading badly.

The guess comes first

We should be honest about how typing actually happens. With only sixteen options, the gut chooses first, often within seconds of watching someone speak. Then the reasoning starts. We gather the details that fit, explain away the ones that don't, and build a story around a verdict we already hold.

That is motivated reasoning. Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber argue in *The Enigma of Reason* (2017) that human reasoning evolved mainly to justify and persuade, not to discover. Typing shows it in its purest form.

None of this is a scandal. Hans-Georg Gadamer argued in *Truth and Method* (1960) that all understanding begins with a projection. The moment a meaning appears, we project a meaning onto the whole, before we've earned it. He called these fore-judgements "prejudices", and meant the word without its sneer. Understanding doesn't start from a blank slate. It starts from a guess. What matters is what we build on it.

Good explanations

Science starts with a guess too. That surprises people who picture scientists weighing facts until a conclusion emerges. Karl Popper spent his career dismantling that picture. Knowledge, he argued, grows by conjecture and refutation. We guess boldly, then hunt for the reason the guess fails. A theory survives only for as long as it resists our best attempts to break it.

David Deutsch sharpened this in *The Beginning of Infinity* (2011). A good explanation is hard to vary. Change any detail and it stops explaining. A bad explanation can be adjusted to fit anything, which means it explains nothing. And Deutsch doesn't confine this to science. Conjecture and criticism is how all rational inquiry works, in philosophy, mathematics, morality and art as much as in physics.

What marks science out is narrower. A scientific theory must predict what will be observed in the detached, concrete, external world, here and now. We never see a dinosaur. We see rocks with odd shapes in them, and guess an explanation involving animals that lived 70 million years ago. The explanation reaches deep into the past, but it is tested against what lies on the ground in front of us.

Popper's objection to psychoanalysis grew from this. In Vienna in 1919 he worked with Alfred Adler, and later described taking him a case. Adler analysed it at once in terms of his theory of inferiority feelings, without having seen the child. Asked how he could be so sure, Adler cited his "thousandfold experience". Popper replied that this case must now make it a thousand-and-one-fold.

His own example makes the point. One man pushes a child into the water to drown it, and another gives his life trying to save a child. Freud could explain both, by repression in one case and sublimation in the other. Adler could explain both as two ways of overcoming inferiority. Every case confirmed the theory, and that was its weakness. Einstein had just done the opposite. General relativity predicted how far starlight would bend around the sun, and the 1919 eclipse expedition could have proved him wrong. It didn't.

Popper didn't call psychoanalysis worthless. He said it contained interesting psychological suggestions, but in the form of myths rather than testable claims. Its mistake was to present itself as science.

From the rock face to reverie

If rational inquiry is conjecture and criticism everywhere, the real question is what the criticism answers to. Socionics' own four clubs map the territory well.

	Logic	Ethics
Sensing	ST: external, detached, here and now	SF: feeling bound to physical reality
Intuition	NT: imagination disciplined by fact	NF: inner, involved, inseparable from feeling

At one corner stands the ST club, the world of science proper. Its facts are detached, concrete and external: the rock in the quarry, the reading on the dial, available to anyone who looks. At the opposite corner stands the NF club, the world of reverie. There are no here-and-now external facts to appeal to. There are only inner, involved perceptions, and they can't be separated from the feelings they carry. The meaning of a story, the significance of a life, the subtext of a gesture: none of these lies on the ground waiting to be dug up.

The other two clubs sit between. The SF club's feelings are tied directly to empirical reality: comfort, taste, bodily presence, the atmosphere in a room. The NT club's imaginings range freely, but they are held in check by a background grasp of how the external world actually works. The SF person feels the concrete. The NT person imagines the abstract, but with one eye on the evidence.

Seen this way, science isn't the model that every other inquiry fails to live up to. It's one corner of a larger map. Socionics itself, when we use it to read people, lives mostly in the opposite corner.

Two mistakes about Persephone

Deutsch's favourite example of a bad explanation is the Greek myth of Persephone. Winter comes, the story says, because Persephone must spend part of each year in the underworld, and her mother Demeter grieves. As an account of the seasons it's hopeless. Swap in any other goddess and any other sorrow, and the story works just as well. It is endlessly easy to vary.

And the Greeks did treat it, in part, as an account of the seasons. The myth was a failed astronomy programme. Its error was to take the meaning-making of human life, loss and return, a mother's grief, the bargain every life strikes with death, and project it onto the indifferent workings of the physical world. Demeter's sorrow was never going to explain the tilt of the Earth.

Scientism makes the mirror-image mistake. It takes the methods fitted to the detached, external world and turns them on the inner life, then declares anything that fails the test meaningless. It marks the myth down as astronomy and never notices that, as a story about grief and renewal, it has lasted three thousand years.

Socionics can fall into either trap. Treat a typing as a laboratory finding, and you make Persephone's mistake: you present a reading of a character as a finding about the world. Dismiss typing because it isn't a laboratory finding, and you make the scientistic mistake. The way out is to know which corner of the map you're standing in.

Reverie in Model L

I use the word "reverie" deliberately. Model A treats intuition of time as a single aspect. Model L, developed by Kimani White and Aleesha Lowry, splits it into two distinct elements, and the split runs along exactly the line this essay has been drawing.

Apprehension is the detached face: nonverbal understanding of concepts, awareness of temporal trends, insight into events in terms of their strategic implications. It asks where things are heading and what that means for what we should do.

Reverie is the involved face. Kimani White describes it as "fantasising scenarios and aspirational daydreaming; inner reflection on events in terms of narrative significance and subtext". It asks what things mean, and what story they belong to.

That's the activity at the heart of typing. When we sit with our impressions of a person and wait for their character to come into focus, we are reflecting on events for their narrative significance and subtext. We are in reverie in Model L's precise sense.

The element sits differently in the three types argued over this morning:

Type	Reverie	Apprehension
IEI	Base, the centre of the type	Subsidiary: strong, but in the background
EIE	Creative, the instrument of the leading function	Negligent: capable, but set aside
LIE	Negligent: capable, but set aside	Creative, the instrument of the leading function

For the IEI, reverie *is* the type's centre of gravity. For the EIE, it serves the passion and rhetoric of the leading function. For the LIE, the detached, strategic face of intuition takes its place, and reverie drops into the background.

Reverie done well

If typing is reverie, it doesn't follow that every typing is as good as any other. Fiction can be written well or badly, and nobody thinks that makes literary judgement arbitrary. Criticism still works in the world of meaning. It just answers to something other than the rock face.

It shouldn't surprise us that Deutsch's criterion survives the move. If conjecture and criticism is how all rational inquiry works, a good story will be hard to vary too. A good novelist answers to what's already on the page. Chapter twelve can't contradict chapter three without the reader feeling the story sag. Swap out a scene and the whole thing weakens. A good typing works the same way. It weaves a story in which the person's manner, habits, gifts and blind spots belong together, and it doesn't quietly leave the awkward parts out. Its test isn't a prediction about the external world. It's how much of the person the story can hold, and whether it would fall apart if the type were swapped.

Gaston Bachelard understood that the two worlds need different disciplines. He was a serious philosopher of science, and he also wrote *The Poetics of Reverie* (1960). The "day" of rational knowledge tests and corrects. The "night" of reverie gathers images and makes the world habitable. Each is legitimate, and neither should be judged by the other's rules. Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary* (2009) draws a similar division between the brain's hemispheres. The left grasps, categorises and builds closed systems. The right attends to the living, particular whole and its meaning.

Iris Murdoch adds the standard I care most about. In *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) she separates fantasy from imagination. Fantasy is the ego spinning a comforting story about other people. Imagination is the harder work of attending to them as they are. Her example is a mother-in-law, M, who finds her son's wife, D, vulgar and tiresome. Without anything outward changing, M makes herself look again, and comes to see D as refreshingly simple rather than common, spontaneous rather than undignified. That is a truer story and a richer one.

This matters because socionics is usually practised on real people. Nobody wrongs Darcy by misreading him. But when we type our partners, colleagues and friends, and decide someone is our dual, our conflictor or our supervisor, we act on the story. Fantasy shrinks a person to fit our preferences. Good reverie enlarges them.

Three Obamas

Back to the thread. Seen as reverie, the argument changes shape. The three camps aren't rival hypotheses competing for a single truth. They're three novels, and each is partly written from a different set of chapters.

The Obama most of us know is already heavily authored. Speechwriters shaped his words, campaign strategists shaped his image, and the office shaped his conduct. He has also written his own story twice at length, in *Dreams from My Father* (1995) and *A Promised Land* (2020). The EIE camp may be reading the orator at the rally, the LIE camp the cool pragmatist at the press conference, the IEI camp the reflective memoirist.

In Model L, each novel carries its own commitments:

Type	Base	Creative	Role	Vulnerable	Suggestive
EIE	Sentiment	Reverie	Praxis	Observation	Habitus
LIE	Reason	Apprehension	Affect	Stimulation	Animus
IEI	Reverie	Sentiment	Observation	Praxis	Actuation

Here is my own novel, and why I think it holds the most of him.

Obama's centre of gravity is Reverie. Before he held any office, he wrote a memoir in his early thirties about a father he barely knew, and about finding a story in which his own mixed inheritance made sense. That book is inner reflection on events for their narrative significance and subtext, almost to the letter of Kimani White's description. Throughout his career he returned to one line of Martin Luther King's: the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. That is history felt as a story with a direction and a meaning.

Sentiment is the instrument that serves it. The 2004 convention speech and the 2008 speech on race, "A More Perfect Union", are deeply felt conviction carried by dramatic rhetoric and symbolic gesture, moving others to feel and act. In the EIE novel that rhetoric is the whole man. In mine it's the vehicle for a vision that comes first.

The LIE camp is right that he was often cool, cerebral and unflappable. But their novel has to put Reverie in the background, as capable but set aside, and that sits badly with a man who narrated his own life twice and framed politics as an unfolding moral story. The IEI novel also explains the soft spot. Praxis, the hands-on management of methods and

material resources, is the IEI's Vulnerable element. The botched launch of the healthcare.gov website in 2013, a flagship policy undone by its practical machinery, reads to me like a chapter written in that key.

That's my novel. The LIE reader can write a rival one, and the test between them isn't a laboratory. It's which story holds more of Obama, orator, pragmatist and memoirist together, without leaving the awkward chapters out.

What socionics is for

Popper and Deutsch give us the paradigm of the search for good explanations: guess boldly, then try hard to break the guess. In science that criticism answers to the detached, concrete world here and now. It's one of the finest things human beings have built. Socionics doesn't meet its standard, and it doesn't need to.

Socionics belongs to the other corner of the map, with myth, story and interpretation, where the meaningful story is the point. The myth we live by, the religious story, the novel that stays with us for years: none of these is a failed hypothesis. Each is a way of dwelling in the world. Socionics lets us dream our way into other people and ourselves, and find patterns of difference, attraction and friction that make human life more intelligible and more bearable. Reverie, in Model L's precise sense, is the honest name for it.

That doesn't lower the bar. It moves it. A typing is good when it holds the whole person, when it would fall apart if the type were swapped, and when it enlarges the one it describes rather than shrinking them to fit. Which is why a bare verdict of "IEI" left me unsatisfied this morning, even though I agreed with it. The three letters were never the point. The story was.

We all start with a guess. What matters is whether we write the rest as fantasy or as imagination.

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TetraTypes is independent and is not affiliated with the World Socionics Society, Kimani White or Aleesha Lowry. Model L element names and positions follow White and Lowry; the reading of socionics as reverie and the typing of Obama are the author's own.