Literary Appreciation and the Reconfiguration of Understanding

Jeremy Page

This is a draft, please cite the version of the paper published in the collection *Educating Character Through the Arts*.

1. Cognitivism's Modesty

There was a time when the prominent approach in analytic aesthetics to the question of literature's cognitive value was to consider the truth-value and cognitive significance of propositions extracted from literary works. Such views were a target for anti-cognitivists. Most famously, Jerome Stolnitz scorned the very idea of literature possessing significant cognitive value by characterizing the candidate cognitive value of *Pride and Prejudice* in the proposition '[s]tubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart' (Stolnitz, 1992). The complaints of anti-cognitivists against what we can call propositional accounts of the cognitive value of literature, tended to centre on the lack of evidence or argumentation which literary works offer for the propositions which may be extracted from them. However, even if one could argue that a literary work could somehow 'prove' the truth of an extracted proposition, the spirit of Stolnitz's charge was that the content of the literary work's cognitive value as captured in the extracted proposition is underwhelming or 'banal' and unequal to the grander claims made by cognitivists (see also (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, ch. 13). For our purposes, we could also note that drawing a meaningful link between cognitive value as cashed out by propositional theories and the education of character – or the development of the sensitivity to, and understanding of, various aspects of our shared human world which are integral parts of any such education – will be a hard task.

A plethora of accounts are now available which move beyond propositional theories[1] and argue that literature can possess a kind of cognitive value more conducive to a connection with character development or moral edification. Options range widely. Though such a division is porous and imperfect, one way of grouping these accounts is by those which place the emphasis on the skills readers may gain from literary engagement (skills theorists)[2] and those which attempt to identify a

[1] Though see (Kivy, 1997) and (Mikkonen, 2015) for propositional theories which are still of genuine interest.

[2] This first group of cognitivists can be understood as including: Gregory Currie who argues that engagement with literature pushes readers to refine certain imaginative capacities crucial for planning and understanding others (Currie, 1998, see also Currie, 2020 and Novitz, 1987); Jenefer Robinson who takes engagement with literature to help one refine their capacity for emotional sensitivity (Robinson, 1995, 2005); Hilary Putnam who links literature with the development of practical reasoning (Putnam, 1978); Iris Murdoch who argues that literature can, amongst other things,

particular form of knowledge or understanding literature can further in its readers (epistemic theorists)[3].

It is not my purpose to argue against any particular skills or epistemic theorists in this paper. The account I put forward will suggest, however, that there is more to the cognitive value of literature than solely the development of skills. I take it that this chimes with a common thought. When we come away from a literary work which has challenged us and opened up a new perspective on its subject matter, we typically do not understand this experience as valuable only insofar as it has enabled us to better empathize, be oriented emotionally, assess situations and develop plans, or improve any other particular skill. We also commonly think that works are capable of teaching us something substantive about the subject matter which they take up – even if it may be difficult to pin down precisely what this something is.[4] In this vein, I want to try to capture a way in which a literary work's presentation of a subject matter can prompt a reconfiguration of an agent's understanding of that subject matter. Such a reconfiguration is relevant for the education of character as it affects an agent's epistemic orientation in a way that ultimately contributes to the consistency and virtuosity of their interpretation and navigation of the relevant subject matter and of how they act in states of affairs relating to it.

These claims may sound similar to those made by epistemic theorists. A feature of the recent contributions of epistemic theorists, however, is a certain kind of modesty. Theorists have tended to constrain themselves to arguing that literature can clarify, condition, help us apply or challenge what we already know. Thus, Carroll introduces his claims concerning literature's capacity to refine 'understanding' and states that this term 'is meant to mark out the capacity to manipulate what we know and apply it with a sense of intelligibility' (Carroll, 1998, 143, see also Gibson 2007 and Eldridge 1989). In Carrol's case in particular, as well as more generally, this modesty can be traced back to the kinds of objections that cognitivists are used to having to side step. A good way, for example, to avoid objections to cognitivism which attempt to show that literature cannot provide evidence or argumentation for the cognitive value it is purported to have, is to deny that this

help develop a sensitivity to details of moral situations and the capacity for transcending the obfuscating effects of one's own ego (Murdoch, 1967, see also Davies, 2018).

[33] This second group of cognitivists includes: Dorothy Walsh (1969) and David Lodge (2004) who focus on experiential knowledge; Maureen Donnelley ((2019) and Elisabeth Camp (2017) who focus on literature's capacity to help us recognise the perspectives of others; Eileen John (1998) who explains how literature provides opportunities for the fine-tuning of conceptual knowledge; Catherine Elgin who takes some literary works to exemplify certain concepts (Elgin, 1993. (Though for a view closer to that which I advance here see Elgin, 2002)); Martha Nussbaum (1990) who argues that literature enables a rich and particular form of sensitivity to the finer moral aspects of situations; Noel Carroll (1998) and Richard Eldridge (1989) who take literature to help clarify or further knowledge we already have; John Gibson (2007) who argues that literature has the capacity to reflect certain aspects of our human world back to us and enhance our sensitivity to why they matter.

[4] See Currie (2020) for a recent posing of this problem and Schellekens Damman (2020) for a cognitivist response.

cognitive value is the addition of something "new" – i.e., a new belief, explanation or perspective which the reader takes on. If it is instead argued that the cognitive value involves teasing out or refining something already known, then objections concerning the lack of evidence or argumentation lose some of their force.

Kenneth Walden (2015) compares the modesty of recent contributions to debates about the moral-cognitive import of art with the grander claims made concerning art's relationship to truth in the history of philosophy. Walden focuses on what many of these grander claims have in common. Namely, the idea that art has the potential to prompt or lay the groundwork for moral revolution. Thus he writes that the arts in general, and literature in particular, have 'the power to reconfigure because of their ability to circumvent the more standard modes of ethical discourse – modes which, as a structural matter, may not accommodate more radical critiques and calls for reconfiguration' (Walden, 2015: 293). Against this revolutionary or radically reconfigurative vision of art's cognitive import, the claims of modest cognitivism – that art initiates 'accretionary' gains by helping facilitate or refine the application of our concepts – do indeed seem modest.

In defending the view that literature has the capacity to enact the reconfiguration of an agent's understanding of some subject matter, I aim to occupy a position beyond the recent modesty of many cognitivist arguments, yet significantly more modest than Walden's. I have in mind something like a transformation of an agent's objectual understanding. Such a cognitive change need not entail, for example, that one's current moral perspective is radically challenged or abandoned for a new framework of values. However, it involves more than just the 'accretionary' changes to an agent's outlook which have increasingly become the focus of attention in the literature. The position will become clearer as I move on to introduce a literary example in the next section, but before doing that it is worth mentioning a couple of things about the relevant notion of 'understanding'.

Firstly, the form of understanding I am interested in is objectual. That is, it is understanding of subject matter or topic, and relates to a subject matter taken as a whole: e.g., thermodynamics, love or the behaviour of bees. It involves the capacity to unify, simplify or draw together the disparate aspects of a subject matter (see Grimm, 2012: 105). As Linda Zagzebski puts it: 'In understanding we are able to see unity in complex phenomena, and that enables us to see some part of the world as a single object' (Zagzebski, 2019: 131). This capacity will thus usually involve casting certain

features of the subject matter as central, i.e. giving them prominence in one's representations, explanations and reasoning concerning the subject matter (see Camp 2019, 20-25).[5]

An understanding of a subject matter has value which isn't exhausted by its truth or accuracy. It also involves a development of an agent's capacity to efficiently access and process information regarding the domain. As Catherine Elgin puts it '[a]dvancement of understanding involves finding order in or imposing order on the information at hand' (1996: 189). When understanding is reconfigured various changes to one's epistemic orientation are likely to result. An agent may either change their mode of drawing a certain subject matter together as a single object, or, perhaps, for the first time develop such a mode. This will involve new features being taken to be central, or some other form of reconfiguration in how central aspects are seen to relate to each other. It will further be the case that an agent's mode of accessing and processing information relating to the subject matter will be altered or transformed.

As noted above, the particular form of cognitive value I want to draw out will come into better focus when I discuss the literary example of Jane Austen's *Emma* in the next section. It is often noted that communicating or teaching understanding, for example in a testimonial exchange, is difficult.[6] In section three, I touch on this question whilst further specifying the nature of the cognitive value of the literary work and its relation to literary appreciation. In section four, I then summarise the discussion and explore the potential of the account introduced to capture the cognitive value of a wide array of great literary works; I focus on works which we are inclined to think do indeed enrich our epistemic outlook in a way that ultimately develops our character and capacity as ethical agents.

Section 2: Characterizing Cognitive Value

Emma is a novel about social cognition.[7] That is to say, it takes the process via which agents process social happenings, assess the beliefs and desires of the actors involved in them and interpret the

[5] When an agent has a good understanding, the features cast as central are in fact central in the domain. This is typically because they are, for example, explanatorily central. In this way at least, understanding is tied, however tightly or loosely, to the facts relating to the domain. This relates, of course, to the question of whether, or what form of, factivity requirement there is on objectual understanding. My view fits most easily with the assumption of some form of weak or moderate factivity requirement, though I wish to remain unembroiled in the controversy. See Zagzebski (2001), Elgin (2009) and for an overview of the debate Gordon (2017).

[6] See, for example, Zagzebski (2009, 145-146), Hills (2009, 19-20) and, for a critical discussion of this standard view, Malfatti (2019).

[7] All page numbers cited in parenthesis in the text are to the Penguin English Library edition of Jane Austen's *Emma* (2012 [1815]).

communications of these actors, as its subject matter. The work centres on four plot points at which the impoverished social cognition of the novel's heroine Emma Woodhouse regarding four separate scenarios is exposed. A first attempt to characterise the cognitive value of Emma may begin by noting the psychological acuity of the novel's handling of Emma's social misreadings.[8] The novel presents Emma's social misreadings not as the result of a dullness of mind or as a failure of reasoning but, on the contrary, as the result of her sharp and active mind distorting her initial apprehension of events in line with her hopes and desires. That is to say, Emma's impoverished social cognition is not simply a result of her having a neutral set of facts and appearances in front of her and then processing these in such a way that she is led into error. It is presented, rather, as a result of her initial countenancing of the social happenings, and the initial appearance they have for her, being already shot through with errors owing to a projection of her hopes and desires on matters which is prior to any conscious monitoring on her part.

The first way we could attempt to capture the cognitive value of the novel, then, would be to focus on how its presentation of this aspect of impoverished social cognition 'is rich in faultless observation of motive and behaviour and speech habits ... making [its] characters as interesting to us as are our own acquaintances' (Lodge, 2012: 483). The familiar thought here would be that the fine observation of the subject matter in the novel makes this subject matter intelligible to the reader in a way which has the potential to deepen the reader's understanding by nuancing their capacity for detecting certain features of social cognition, and so on. The reader may piece together this cognitive value precisely by noting how the work makes the subject matter intelligible and by appraising the psychological plausibility of its presentation. To this end, the reader may note as insightful how the work connects Emma's tendency to misinterpret social happenings to various factors which do indeed seem responsible. These may include, for example: 'her very fixed position in a small and inward-looking community' (Lodge, 2012: 484); her boredom and enthusiasm for finding and projecting intrigue wherever she can; her being a 'spoilt child' (97) who is mollycoddled and indulged by her doting father; and her surrounding herself with characters like Harriet who declare things like '[w]hatever you say is always right' (72) rather than those figures who are closer to being her equal and who may thus be able to challenge her interpretations of events - such as Jane Fairfax.

[8] I assume in the following that *Emma* does indeed have cognitive value. This does not entail, of course, that all instances of readers engaging with it will result in their outlook being improved epistemically. The claim is, rather, that the nature of the novel is such that it makes available the relevant form of cognitive gain when engaged with in an appropriate manner, other things being equal.

This explanation doesn't get us beyond a modest epistemic view of the work's cognitive value. It also ignores the role of the most notable and revolutionary aspect of the novel in constituting the work's cognitive value. This is the pioneering use of what has come to be known as free indirect style. Free indirect style can be glossed for our purposes as the narrative technique which uses 'the heroine herself as a kind of narrator, though in the third person, reporting on her own experience' (Booth, 1991, 138). In *Emma*, part of its significance is that through this technique the novel implicates the reader in Emma's own impoverished perspective on social happenings. The reader does not usually have direct access to a neutral set of facts regarding the developing scenarios in and around Highbury from which they can easily track the developments of the plot and the positions and motives of the different characters involved in it. Rather, the reader's perspective is submerged in Emma's. Just as various happenings initially appear to Emma in such a way as to already suggest the confirmation of her projections and desires, so it often is for the reader whose primary access to these events is precisely through the narrative which is, as per the narrative style, Emma's own.

This gets us closer to what is indeed remarkable, and of literary value, about the work. Through the effect of this technique, and the particular ways in which it is marshalled at various points in the plot, the reader can experience something like themselves being caught in the epistemic position which the work takes as its subject matter. The reader is led by this effect of the narrative style at various points to follow Emma's misinterpretations and to have their own expectations overturned at the same time Emma does. At this point, we can make a second attempt to characterise the novel's cognitive value. This attempt is broadly in line with those views of literature's cognitive value which cast it in terms of 'experiential knowledge' (Walsh, 1969; Lodge, 2004) and is related to those who think that literature enables us to recognise perspectives other than our own (Donnelly, 2019; Camp, 2017). The thought here would be that the novel affords us some insight into the first-person perspective of agents undergoing the relevant form of impoverished social cognition. This is clearly different to the first attempt to cash out the work's cognitive value. It foregrounds that readers undergo an experience which is masterfully curated to be relevantly similar to that of an agent undergoing the form of impoverished social cognition which the work is about. It involves not only our following and appraising the work's handling of impoverished social cognition, but also how the work enables us to undergo something like this experience ourselves.

To stop here is still to stop short of fully capturing the work's cognitive value, however. The work offers readers the opportunity to do more than be swept along in Emma's perspective, recognise it and understand something of its experiential quality. Indeed, even by the point at which Emma's first misreading is exposed by Mr Elton declaring his affections for her as opposed to

Harriet, the reader is only partly trapped within Emma's perspective and should be beginning to develop their own perspective on how Emma is falsifying the fictional facts. The work furnishes the reader with access to enough material which runs counter to Emma's understanding of events to develop such a perspective (see Davies, 2018: 195-197). The charade which partly reveals Mr Elton's affections, for example, is passed by him not to Harriet but to Emma. Mr Elton also fails to conform to Emma's expectations when he is excited at the prospect of attending a party with her at Randalls, rather than checking on the condition of Harriet who is at home ill. Here it is observed by a narratorial voice, on this occasion clearly distanced from Emma's, that Emma was 'too eager and busy in her own previous conceptions and views to hear him impartially, or see him with clear vision' (108). In addition to this, Mr Knightly offers evidence against Mr Elton being interested in the lowly Harriet when he reveals that Mr Elton is interested in improving himself socially through marriage.

The ways in which the work pushes the reader to develop their own perspective on Emma's social cognition are themselves indicative of the broader understanding of the subject matter which the work can be seen as developing.[9] This broader understanding is not reducible to any experiential knowledge it may afford or to the intelligible presentation it offers of the subject matter in linking social cognition with various causal factors. It includes a broader perspective which governs the choices made in presenting the first-hand experience of impoverished social cognition and the various ways it is tied to certain causal factors. This perspective is revealed most perspicuously in the work's marshalling of the four major plot points in the distinctive way that its employment of free indirect style makes possible. The narrative style stands as a central model and motif organising the other elements of the work's presentation of social cognition. As such it functions to represent and communicate something taken to be central to the subject matter. Though not reducible to a soundbite or proposition, we can gesture to this central thought by noting again that in the novel impoverished social cognition is presented primarily as a result of an agent receiving a falsifying picture of social happenings in their initial apprehensions of them, and being led to error from this point. It is presented, that is, as a projective error. As opposed, for example, to agents consciously enacting processes of reasoning which lead them from the base of an initially transparent perception of events into error as it may otherwise be understood – as an error in reasoning.

[9] The thought that the work can be seen as developing a perspective on a subject matter need not entail some form of interpretative monism, i.e. the view that the work develops a single determinate perspective on the subject matter. It is compatible also with the view that there are a multitude of appropriate interpretations of the work and the nature of the perspective it draws on its subject matter. It is also compatible with interpretations of the work which take something other than social cognition as being the work's central theme.

That the narrative style provides a nuanced, efficient and psychologically compelling vehicle for navigating the four distinct instances of social misreading supports the idea that it is well chosen as a means for presenting the subject matter. It suggests also that the central thought which it relates to is central also to the subject matter itself – and that it is a thought around which an understanding of the subject can fruitfully be configured. This all further suggests that part of what a reader may gain from the work, and the multitude of ways it presents impoverished social cognition as a projective error, is access to precisely a new mode of configuring their understanding concerning the subject matter. Indeed, we needn't think of the very motif of free indirect style as a ladder to this new understanding which is then kicked away. It can itself form a part of the agent's reconfigured understanding. In the next section, it is our task to sketch a view of the process via which this may happen.

That such a (re)organisation can be thought of something genuinely reconfigurative, and as extending beyond the claims of modest forms of epistemic theory, is plausible. Especially if we put ourselves in the position of the audience the work was intended for at the beginning of the 19th century. An audience who were likely yet to encounter the technique of free indirect style at all. Who were certainly yet to see the style mastered. An audience thus without access to the subsequent ubiquity with which the style was used following Jane Austen to interrogate and present various aspects of human psychology – from the works of Henry James at the end of the century up until the present day. An audience also, of course, not privy to the major developments in psychology in the 19th and 20th centuries. What the work provided attentive readers from its original audience – and later provides us through also inspiring a plethora of works which present human psychology via similar employments of narrative style – stretches beyond a clarification or conditioning of knowledge we already possess. What we are given access to is something new, a new perspective and mode of organising the subject matter around a central thought. This, in turn, is material from which our understanding can be reconfigured.

Section Three: Frames and Literary Appreciation

The foregoing provides us with reasons for thinking that literature can play a role in reconfiguring an agent's understanding. A number of complications arise when attempting to account for how understanding can be communicated or prompted by attending to the words of others. There are two ways we might begin to think about how this process plays out. Firstly, we can consider how a literary work possesses or contains understanding. Or, at least, how it provides a basis or prompt

for a reader to reconfigure their understanding.[10] Secondly, we can consider the kind of reader engagement which may lead to a gain in understanding. We are at home with the idea that knowledge can be transmitted via attention to the words of others, as happens in standard testimonial cases. Understanding, however, is associated with a form of cognitive effort and achievement of the individual subject which makes it unlikely that it can be transmitted as knowledge can be. Thus, we need to provide a picture of the kind of reader engagement involved in reconfiguring understanding in literary appreciation.

I'll take up the first question first. Referring to Elisabeth Camp's notion of how perspectives can be communicated is helpful in this regard. Camp outlines an intuitive picture of perspectives as 'in their essence tools for thinking, not thoughts per se' and 'open-ended intuitive dispositions to interpret' (Camp, 2019: 25). They are open-ended in that, as dispositions to interpret, they are operative in how we come to think about particular topics or states of affairs. That is, for example, different political perspectives may lead agents to interpret a politician's refusal to engage with a constituent's concerns with immigration either as a noble stand against racism or as further evidence of political snobbery and disdain for the views of ordinary people. Relevantly for our concerns, an agent's wider perspective on social cognition will influence how we might characterize the fault in social cognition of a particular agent on a particular occasion. Perspectives are not only involved in the production of such characterizations but also in monitoring and nuancing them, that is, they are helpful in 'updating a given characterization over time, as new information and experiences come in' (ibid., 26).

As such, perspectives enjoy a close relation with understanding. When an agent has a good grasp or understanding of a subject matter, the perspective they have on that subject matter will ideally reflect this understanding. As perspectives are dispositions to interpret, and are related to the broader and more holistic grasp of the agent which constitutes understanding, it is difficult for them, or the understanding which lies behind them, to be communicated. The sharing of explanations, for example, will often be inadequate as a means for communicating the kind of grasp and mode of interpreting the subject matter as a whole which is in question. Camp points to what she calls 'frames' as a way in which perspectives can be made available.

> As I will use the term, frames are representational vehicles… under an intended interpretation, where that interpretation itself functions as an open-ended principle for

[10] Attributing understanding to a literary work may be thought to sound unnatural, as we usually attribute understanding to agents. For this reason, I stick mainly to using the second formulation above and jettisoning such talk in favour of talking in terms of understanding being what is available to the reader in literary engagement instead.

> organizing and regulating one's overall intuitive thinking about one or more subjects. Frames crystalize perspectives into compact, explicit form. (ibid., 28)

This brings into view a plausible way of accounting for how a perspective on a subject matter can be available for readers to access in a literary work.

Turning again to our discussion of *Emma*, we can employ this terminology to help express points touched on earlier. The work's employment of free indirect style can be taken as a frame for impoverished social cognition. Its employment in the novel serves as a vehicle for representing or communicating a perspective on this subject matter. This perspective itself is characterized by and revolves around the central thought concerning impoverished social cognition typically being a result of projective error. This frame is present in the novel not as an abstract conception. It is made concrete relative to various characterizations mapping the fictional occurrences of impoverished social cognition. This helps the reader access the frame and the perspective it represents. The novel's drawing the reader through the plot and making salient the ways Emma's misreadings can plausibly be interpreted, is instructive as a means for aiding the reader to ascertain how the frame – as a 'representational vehicle… under an intended interpretation' (ibid.) – is itself to be interpreted as manifesting a perspective on the subject matter. That is to say, various ways in which the central motif can be comprehended as relating to the subject matter are made salient by the way it is employed as a mode for characterising the fictional occurrences of impoverished social cognition in the novel.

Though some of the terminology here may seem overly precise – as if to suggest that Austen's goal in writing the novel was solely to educate her readers – noting that the work can be seen as containing a frame on its subject matter is not at all in tension with the fact that the work has other purposes and holds other joys for the reader. The familiar and intuitive thought which the above captures is that literary works can make available to us new perspectives on subject matters and new ways of understanding them.

A similar worry may arise when we turn, as we now do, to consider the kind of engagement which a reader will have to go through to access frames present in literary works. That is, that we will have to envisage readers acting in ways which are alien, and perhaps run counter to, normal modes of literary appreciation. The process via which readers come into contact with such perspectives, and open up the possibility of reconfiguring their understanding, is also familiar however.

Indeed the kind of imaginative work associated with the achievement of understanding is plausibly placed at the centre of literary appreciation, as well as other forms of artistic and aesthetic appreciation (Breitenbach, 2020). This imaginative work is related to the capacity to develop a unity in how one conceives of a subject matter such that it can be taken as a whole. As noted earlier, this often takes the form of constructing a view of certain features of the subject matter as being central, of mapping subsidiary features in networks of relations to these central features, and so on. It is plausibly the very same kind of imaginative work which is involved in literary appreciation.

On the seminal view offered by Lamarque and Olsen (1994), for example, the literary stance begins with an 'expectation of a humanly interesting content' where this content consists in the literary work's presentation or interpretation of its theme (ibid., 402). The kind of themes foregrounded by Lamarque and Olsen are freedom of the will, jealousy, romantic love, etc. We can extend this picture to include subject matters like that which we have focused on. The 'aim of appreciation is to identify such a content in a literary work' (ibid., 266) and elicit its particular interpretation of its theme. In order to do this, the reader has to encounter a subject matter or theme salient in the literary work and explore how the work's literary features – its development of a plot, choice of narrative style, focus of descriptive and empathetic resources, and so on – can be organised in relation to this subject matter in such a way that the work achieves a novel mode of presenting or interpreting it. When this process is successful what readers gain is an appreciation of the literary work which consists in an understanding of how its theme is presented. What is won via this process is access to the work's presentation of its theme. There is value in Othello's presentation of jealousy, for example, and forming a literary appreciation of it enables a reader to access this value by eliciting its presentation in their engagement with the play.

The process of forming an understanding of a subject matter (as this is paradigmatically conceived) and eliciting a literary work's presentation of its theme involve a similar form of imaginative work then (Breitenbach, 2020). For our purposes we can go one step further, a step which Lamarque and Olsen are famously reticent to take. Literary appreciation of works with cognitive value like *Emma* involves not only the development of the appreciators understanding of some value or interest which *Emma* has in separation from its cognitive value. Proper appreciation also involves gaining access to the perspective of the work which aptly frames the subject matter of social cognition. When developing an appreciative interpretation of the work, readers are routinely and appropriately engaged in comparing the novel's mode of handling the subject matter not only in relation to the fictional occurrences in the novel, but with how we encounter it in our social world and in our own successes and failures of social cognition. This is not an activity

separate from literary appreciation, but rather is a central part of it. Full literary appreciation of Emma cannot be had unless on undertakes this process.

In reading *Emma* we are already engaged in the process of assessing the compatibility of our previous conceptions of the ways in which agents read and misread each other's intentions. We may already be, implicitly or explicitly, involved in a process of reconfiguring how we understand others who are implicated in some misreading; or of how to check and correct ourselves when we fear we might be; or of which of our habits leave us vulnerable to being so implicated. We may find further evidence of this when our mode of apprehending and comprehending new states of affairs relating to the subject matter is changed in line with the perspective encountered in the literary work. When these processes occur, it seems to me, what happens is rightly called a reconfiguration of our understanding which is prompted by a literary appreciation of a work's cognitive value. This process extends, of course, beyond the time at which we sit with the novel. It extends into our lives. The cognitive gain we enjoy will take its time to be maximised as our thought is gradually transformed. The efficiency of particular literary devices like the use of free indirect speech in *Emma* for this purpose extends beyond their accuracy. The elegance of this frame motivates and facilitates our returning to it when we encounter situations relating to the subject matter again in our lives and thoughts.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have put forward a picture of how the cognitive value of literature can prompt a reconfiguration of an agent's understanding of a given subject matter. I have sought to argue that we can go beyond the modesty of recent forms of cognitivism. I have done this by focusing on how literary works contain frames which relate to perspectives on subject matters and how in literary appreciation readers are able to grasp and explore these perspectives.

In concluding, I will make three further remarks. The first is that the account offered above straddles the divide tentatively offered at the outset between skills and epistemic theorists. This is unsurprising as understanding involves both a stance toward and grasp of facts and the relations between them, as well as various skills and abilities in interpreting, organising and navigating in theoretical and practical modes. Reconfiguring understanding will involve processes of taking on beliefs concerning, for example, the centrality of certain features of a subject matter as well as exercising various imaginative capacities. When it results in a reconfiguration of understanding this

will consist in both an improved epistemic grasp but also the development of capacities for interpretation, explanation and sensitivity.

The second is that the picture put forward here is one which has the capacity to support a meaningful link between literary appreciation, the cognitive value of literature and the education of character. Whilst the focus hasn't been directly on the training of virtue, the form of reconfiguration in question is such that it has the capacity to improve and undergird the consistency of an agent's patterns of interpreting morally relevant states of affairs. The example I focused on is representative of a broad range of literary works in that its subject matter surrounds societal conduct and relates also to ways agents may monitor and train themselves relative to this domain. Indeed, it is the case that one cannot be virtuous without developing social cognition free of the flaws Emma suffers from. This suggests that there is a vital role for such novels in character education. It further suggests the importance of training the specific skills of literary appreciation which are required in order for a reader to grasp novel's perspectives on the subject matters they present and then go on to use these perspectives to reconfigure their own understanding.

The final point to make is that, having said this, literary works of cognitive value are a heterogeneous category in their choice of subject matter, in the relation between their form and cognitive value and also in how prescriptive and determinate the perspectives they offer are. On this latter point, it may be observed that Jane Austen's *Emma* – particularly under the reading I have offered here – can be understood as a work which provides a relatively detailed and determinate perspective. I nevertheless think that the model offered here is applicable to a wide array of literary works. When arguing that the same imagination is present in artistic appreciation and achievements of understanding, Angela Breitenbach (2020) takes up the example of how an audience may piece together the themes suggested by certain bodily movements in Pina Bausch's *Vollmond*. The activity of drawing the movements together under the theme is argued to provide some new mode of understanding certain aspects of human relationships. In such a case, the way in which a perspective on the theme or subject matter may be pieced together is likely to be much less determinate than in our example. Something similar will of course be the case with works of literature which allow more freedom of interpretation and which have a cognitive value that is more suggestive than determinative.

Nevertheless, the model offered here is compelling. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* opens up a new perspective on the relationship between crime, punishment, guilt, forgiveness and salvation which can reconfigure how we understand these things; Alice Munro's particular mode of capturing everyday behaviours as acts of abuse in the stories in *Too Much Happiness* has the

potential to enable us to reconfigure how we understand the character of our own and others domestic relations; David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* opens a perspective on how entertainment, irony and addiction are linked in Western culture which can impart an understanding of this subject matter we would not enjoy otherwise. Whilst a dividing line between what is a clarification or application of knowledge and perspectives already possessed and what is a reconfiguration of understanding may be hard to pin down, literature does have the capacity to enact the latter as well as the former. If we want to do justice to this power of literature in our own lives and in education more broadly, we should be prepared to defend it too – even if its defence will entail that we have to take meet various anti-cognitivist challenges head on, rather than side-stepping them.[11]

Reference List

Austen, J. (2012) *Emma*. London: Penguin English Library.

Booth, W. C. (1991) 'Control of Distance in Jane Austen's Emma', in Lodge, D. (ed.) *Jane Austen: Emma, A Casebook*. rev. ed. London: Macmillan, pp. 137–156.

Breitenbach, A. (2020) 'One Imagination in Experiences of Beauty and Achievements of Understanding', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 60(1), pp. 71–88. doi: 10.1093/aesthj/ayz048.

Camp, E. (2017) 'Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 31(1), pp. 73–102. doi: 10.1111/phpe.12102.

Camp, E. (2019) 'Perspectives and Frames in Pursuit of Ultimate Understanding', in *Varieties of Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 17–46. doi: 10.1093/oso/9780190860974.003.0002.

Carroll, N. (1998) 'Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding', in Levinson, J. (ed.) *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 126–160.

Currie, G. (1998) 'Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction', in Levinson, J. (ed.) *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 161–181.

[11] I would like to thank Elisabeth Schellekens, Irene Martínez Marín, Jonathan Weinberg, Nick Riggle and Servaas van der Berg for helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter. The chapter has also benefitted from feedback at the 'Educating Character through the Arts' Conference at the University of Birmingham 2018, the 'Cognitive Relevance of the Arts' conference at the University of Tampere in 2017, the annual conference of the *European Society of Aesthetics* 2019 and the annual conference of the *American Society of Aesthetics* 2019. Thanks also to the editors of this collection for their suggestion of multiple amendments which have improved the chapter.

Currie, G. (2020) *Imagining and Knowing: the Shape of Fiction*, *Imagining and Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/oso/9780199656615.001.0001.

Davies, D. (2018) 'Misreading Emma', in Dadlez, E. (ed.) *Jane Austen's Emma: Philosophical Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 184–214. doi: 10.1093/oso/9780190689414.001.0001.

Donnelly, M. (2019) 'The Cognitive Value of Literary Perspectives', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 77(1), pp. 11–22. doi: 10.1111/jaac.12621.

Eldridge, R. (1989) *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Elgin, C. Z. (1993) 'Understanding: Art and Science', *Synthese*, 95(1), pp. 13–28. doi: 10.1007/BF01064665.

Elgin, C. Z. (1996) *Considered Judgment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Elgin, C. Z. (2002) 'Creation as Reconfiguration: Art in the Advancement of Science', *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 16(1), pp. 13–25. doi: 10.1080/02698590120118792.

Elgin, C. Z. (2009) '``Is Understanding Factive?"', in Haddock, A., Millar, A., and Pritchard, D. (eds) *Epistemic Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 322–330.

Gibson, J. (2007) *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gordon, E. C. (2017) 'Understanding in Epistemology', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Grimm, S. (2012) 'The Value of Understanding', *Philosophy Compass*, 7(2), pp. 103–117. doi: 10.1111/j.1747-9991.2011.00460.x.

Hills, A. (2009) 'Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology', *Ethics*, 120(1), pp. 94–127. doi: 10.1086/648610.

John, E. (1998) 'Reading Fiction and Conceptual Knowledge: Philosophical Thought in Literary Context', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56(4), pp. 331–348. doi: 10.2307/432124.

Kivy, P. (1997) 'On the Banality of Literary Truths', *Philosophic Exchange*, 28(1), pp. 17–27.

Lamarque, P. and Olsen, S. H. (1994) *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lodge, D. (2004) *Conciousness and the Novel*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lodge, D. (2012) 'Reading and Rereading Emma', in *Austen, J. Emma*. London: Penguin, pp. 477–486.

Malfatti, F. I. (2019) 'On Understanding and Testimony', *Erkenntnis*. doi: 10.1007/s10670-019-00157-8.

Mikkonen, J. (2015) 'On Studying the Cognitive Value of Literature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 73(3), pp. 273–282. doi: 10.1111/jaac.12172.

Murdoch, I. (1967) *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Novitz, D. (1987) *Knowledge, Fiction & Imagination*. Philidelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1990) *Love's Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Putnam, H. (1978) *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Robinson, J. (1995) 'L'éducation Sentimentale', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 73(2), pp. 212–226. doi: 10.1080/00048409512346551.

Robinson, J. (2005) *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schellekens Damman, E. (2020) *Commentary on Gregory Currie Imagining and Knowing: the Shape of Fiction*, *junkyardofthemind.com [Blog]*.

Stolnitz, J. (1992) 'On the Cognitive Triviality of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32(3), pp. 191–200. doi: 10.1093/bjaesthetics/32.3.191.

Walden, K. (2015) 'Art and Moral Revolution', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 73(3), pp. 283–295. doi: 10.1111/jaac.12173.

Walsh, D. (1969) *Literature and Knowledge*. Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press.

Zagzebski, L. (2001) 'Recovering Understanding', in Steup, M. (ed.) *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*. Oxford University Press.

Zagzebski, L. (2009) *On Epistemology*. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth.

Zagzebski, L. (2019) 'Toward a Theory of Understanding', in *Varieties of Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 123–136. doi: 10.1093/oso/9780190860974.003.0007.