

# CHAPTER 20

## Empathy

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### I

While the concept of empathy is quite new to the philosophical scene, it is taken to identify a range of affective phenomena that have presumably been with us all along. Empathy is sometimes thought essential to morality, the hallmark of love, a key to understanding the mental life of others, our natural safeguard against narcissism, even the emotional import of basic forms of mirror-neurological activity.<sup>1</sup> Despite its relative youth, research on empathy has attracted the attention of scholars working in many fields and it is put to a vast array of theoretical uses. If there is anything common to many of the theories of empathy currently on offer, it is that empathy makes possible an especially intimate and powerful form of *identification*. It underwrites our capacity—put imprecisely at first mention—to feel not just *for* another but *as* another.<sup>2</sup> To this extent, empathy has as its goal the overstepping, in emotion, of the space that runs between oneself and another. This may sound like a tall order, and one is at times justified in thinking that there is a grandness to many discussions of empathy that would make modest philosophers uncomfortable. But this should also suffice to convey a sense of why the concept of empathy has piqued the interest of philosophers of mind and emotion, ethicists, and philosophers of art.

As in other areas of scholarship, philosophers of literature are still forging a sense of what empathy is as well as the extent to which it can illuminate something interesting about our engagement with literary works of art. This makes it exciting, since one sets to work with the sense of in part creating, and not merely participating in, a cutting-edge debate. But it also means that discussions of empathy in literary aesthetics (and in general) have a stipulative air, and for obvious reasons it is challenging to debate the role of empathy in literary experience if there is little agreement on the nature or meaning of empathy. With this in mind, my discussion of empathy will be in part reflective of what others' mean by it and in part of the sense I think stands the greatest chance of doing interesting work in literary aesthetics, namely, empathy as a form of imaginative,

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1 The most comprehensive volume on empathy is that of Coplan and Goldie (2011), and I acknowledge a heavy debt to it. Works that endorse or otherwise discuss the above-listed claims made on behalf of empathy are: Gallese (2001), Ramachandran (2006), Perry (2010), Toi (1982), Currie and Ravenscroft (2002), Zahavi (2008), Chessick (1985), and de Vignemont and Frith (2007). Perry's work is popular; the others are standard philosophical or scientific studies.

2 Empathy may of course do more than this, and in cognitive science and philosophy of mind it is not uncommon to extend the concept of empathy to mental states and somatic experiences that are not obviously affective in nature. Gregory Currie, for example, argues that an empathic mental state need not involve a *feeling* at all (Currie, 2004, 108). For evidence that empathy can on occasion even be a tactile, rather than affective, experience, see Keyzers, Wicker, et al. (2004).

and essentially other-directed, perspective-taking. I will conclude with a consideration of skeptical arguments against the claims I here make about the relevance of empathy to the philosophy of literature. The general thrust of my argument will be a call for both tempering and broadening the demands we place on empathy when explaining how literary works move us.

## II

To make a complex history very brief indeed, it can be said that empathy has its conceptual birth in the moral psychology of 18th century Scottish philosophy and its lexical birth in the aesthetic theory of 19th century German philosophy. The term *‘Einfühlung’*—to feel ‘in’ or ‘into’—first appears in 1873, coined by Robert Vischer to explain the affective significance of aesthetic form. Soon after, Theodor Lipps expanded it from its initial aesthetic usage to account for how we grasp the mental life of others: how we experience another as a *person*, as a self whose inner life is in relevant cognitive, conative, and moral respects of a piece with ours.<sup>3</sup> *‘Einfühlung’* makes its way into English as ‘empathy’ in the early twentieth century, but the phenomenon it designates is arguably present well before this, detected in discussions of sympathy in the work of Adam Smith and David Hume. In their writings we find pressure placed on the concept of sympathy to explain two essentially distinct ways in which one can be affectively related to another’s emotion.<sup>4</sup> And for our purposes it is this distinction that sets the stage for the work on empathy most significant for literary aesthetics.

It is true that in everyday English the terms ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy’ are often used interchangeably, though there are a few key differences that even ordinary language respects. Sympathy is felt, in the broadest sense possible, for the *suffering* and *misfortune* of others, whereas empathy can be experienced for a much wider range of experiences, both positive and negative (see Prinz, 2010, 531-7). I can empathically experience your elation upon the birth of your child; I cannot sympathize with you for it, at least not without interpreting it as somehow pitiable (see Harrold, 2000, 343-45). There is also a sense in which we can speak of sympathy as a distinct passion, an emotion alongside other emotions. Not so for empathy, which designates not a kind of emotion but a manner in which we can experience emotions. To call an experience empathic is, for instance, to say that I relate to your *joy, sadness, fear, pride, embarrassment*, and so on, in a particular way: I represent myself as *sharing* an emotion not just with you but, as it were, *as* and *because* you do. If you and I are both bored by the same terrible philosophy lecture, my state is not thereby empathic, though it does match yours; and we would not say of an angry mob, just because each member feels as the others do, that all in the throng are having a collective empathic experience. This requirement that in empathic experience I feel an emotion ‘as and because’ you do is a way of specifying a distinctive feature of empathy’s etiology: that it arises when I *identify* with you a particular way. Strictly speaking, I can ‘identify’ with others simply when I see my concerns, desires, values, and beliefs reflected in

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3 See Steuber (2008) and Zahavi (2010) for discussions of the role of empathy in Vischer and Lipps through strands of twentieth century phenomenology and hermeneutics.

4 See Coplan and Goldie (2009), X-XI, for a discussion of Hume and Smith. We see something resembling what we now call empathy when Smith describes sympathy in the following terms: “By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something, which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.” (as quoted in Coplan and Goldie, 2009, XI).

them, but this is not the kind of identification—merely seeing myself in another—that empathy requires.

So what form of identification does empathy require? Before I can explain this, let me introduce the notion of a ‘local self-narrative’ and define it as the conception a subject has of her situation that explains why she takes herself to feel as she does. I use ‘local self-narrative’ fairly loosely, to indicate the grounds a subject would indicate—the ‘story’ she would be inclined to tell — if called on to explain why she is in a certain emotional state. The idea I will defend is that another’s story matters to us in a fairly precise way in cases of empathy, and that empathy assumes a fit—I will not here try to define how tight the fit must be—between the target’s self-narrative and the empathizer’s conception of it. Note that the conception a subject has of the grounds of her emotion can be narratively ‘rich’ or narratively ‘poor’. That is, it might consist in the story of, in effect, one’s life: in the case of Oedipus, the cruel trick Fate played on him from cradle to grave. Or it might consist in the specification of a mere causal relation: in the case of a firefighter, he feels terror *because of* the fire raging all around him.

If this appeal to narrative feels unmotivated, consider that empathy requires *imagination* (about which more below), and think of narrative as one way of labeling where the imagination turns for content. But the notion of narrative is helpful for another reason. When Medea kills her children to spite Jason for his betrayal—he abandoned them for a better-heeled princesses—her jealous rage moves us, assuming it does, not simply because she happens to feel it and it is painful, nor because knowing this helps us to predict and explain her extraordinary behavior. For empathy in respect to Medea’s plight to be minimally intelligible, we need an additional piece of information. We need something that explains why any of this is for us of *affective concern*: why it *matters* to us such that we can make sense, to ourselves and to others, of why we are moved by it (see Giovannelli, 2009, 85-7). The idea of a local self-narrative is what I am charging with the role of providing this information. We need to capture the fact that in empathy we think of another’s emotion as an *experience*, not merely as a mental state or a feeling but as a ‘happening’, as something lived through. And narrative is the natural currency of communication when we explain, in everyday language, our experiences. In Peter Goldie’s terms, empathy requires that I “*centrally imagine the narrative* (the thoughts, feelings, and desires) of another person” and that the target of my empathy “should be someone of whom I have *substantial characterization*” (Goldie, 2000, 195). Consider also Berys Gaut: “empathy requires one imaginatively to enter into a character’s mind and feel with him because of one’s imagining of his situation.” (Gaut, 1999, 206) The notion of ‘local self-narrative’ draws on this tradition of thinking about empathy, as demanding not merely that I feel as you do but *because* I identify with you and your situation in a particular way. The narrative expresses a central feature of the form of identification empathy takes, though it is best not to call it *narrative identification*, since in empathy I empathize with you and not with something else called your story.

Lest someone think something silly, this narrative requirement does not imply that in both life and literature all genuinely empathic experiences are preceded by a history lesson or a pause for a moment of instruction. If I enter an emergency room and see a young couple with an empty stroller at their side, both in tears and bearing the signs of shock, I may not know exactly what happened, but I will still perceive their pain in the light of a bare narrative: of two people confronting trauma. In other words, I will see that they are there *because* something has else happened, something very likely terrible, and that they are now suffering in its wake. Whatever a narrative is, we have one when one event is used to explain another in a certain way: when one event renders the occurrence of another intelligible, perhaps causally, perhaps emotionally, perhaps thematically, and so on (what one

sees as the essential narrative link will depend on one's theory of narrative<sup>5</sup>). Thus it is a mistake to think that enlisting narrative here will make empathy too dependent on conscious thought, on an *activity* of story-telling, though in narrative literature one should expect a healthy abundance of this. To be sure, my perception of the suffering couple in the hospital is in a sense simply *narrative-laden*: I see a bare narrative *in* seeing them, as consisting in the pattern of salience my eye yields when moving from their crying to their wedding rings and ultimately to an empty stroller. The use of 'local' in 'local self-narrative' is intended to make as minimal as possible the amount of narrativizing, conscious or unconscious, empathy requires. It registers the fact that empathy seeks at least a basic felt apprehension of what informs the target's emotional state.

There are a number of ways in which one can identify with a target's local self-narrative such that a certain emotional response is made apt. Assume I affectively identify with Medea's local self-narrative because I too have been abused and abandoned by my spouse. I see my experiences reflected in Medea's and so I achieve a sense of fellow-feeling with her. Call this, for the sake of argument, *compassion*: I consider (1) another's experiences from (2) the perspective of my own experiences, and I enlist the latter to give content to the former. Now consider another case. I grasp Medea's local-self-narrative, and in response to her pain, I feel pity. We are now in the vicinity of sympathy. That sympathy is a third-person response is brought to light by two of its defining features: it is *evaluative* and it is *affectively incongruent* with the target's emotional state.<sup>6</sup> Medea feels jealous rage, I feel pity for her on account of it, and my pity is intelligible *as pity* because it casts a kind of affective verdict on her plight.<sup>7</sup> Both component features of sympathy imply that I view her self-narrative from an external standpoint: I care *for* her, not as though I am her. What is fascinating, and endlessly puzzling, about empathy is the extent to which it strives to go where sympathy alone cannot. A grammarian might put it this way: sympathy places its target in the *dative* position of affective experience; empathy, somehow, in the *subject* position. Sympathy, we are constantly reminded, is *for* someone (hence the dative). Empathy, however, strives to achieve the *target's* first-person perspective: to experience Medea's self-narrative from her and not my subject position.

We cannot be too literal about this. For reasons both logical and psychological, I cannot 'switch out' my self for the self of another when attempting to think and feel from another's subject-position. There is always bound to be the intrusion of my 'I', features of my personhood that will inevitably inform and qualify my attempt to think from the perspective of another person. As Amy Coplan puts it, in empathic experience "I preserve a representation of myself that is distinct from my representation of the other." (Coplan, 2004, 143) Were it not for this, were this basic self-other differentiation not preserved, utterly inexplicable and bizarre behavior would ensue, and at any rate we would be having an out-of-body experience rather than a properly empathic one. Thus what do we mean we say that in empathy one comes to think and feel 'as and because' another does? How do we entertain others' self-narratives from *their* perspectives?

It is here that a theory of imagination becomes desirable, needed to explain away the

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<sup>5</sup> See Goldie (2014) and Currie (2009) for treatments of narrative that, among much else, survey prominent theories of narrative. See Carroll (2001b) for the most influential defense in philosophical aesthetics of narrative as form of causal explanation. See Velleman (2003) for a view narrative as a kind of emotional explanation, and see Gibson (2011) for narrative as bestowing upon events an essentially thematic form of meaning.

<sup>6</sup> Of course *the subject* will experience sympathy as a second-person stance, a stance *I* take toward *you* (see Darwall 1998 and 2006).

<sup>7</sup> By calling the verdict 'affective' I signal that the evaluative nature of sympathy need not be understood in purely cognitive terms.

nonsense implied by literalism when asking how we come to inhabit a perspective other than our own. I obviously cannot in fact think and feel *as* another. But the imagination makes possible forms of experience that the real world does not. There are many accounts of imagination on offer, but it is a broadly *simulationist* theory of imagination that is most frequently enlisted in work on empathy. A caveat is in order. The theory of simulation is widely known to philosophers because of its current popularity in work on ‘mindreading’: how we come to predict the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of others. It often enlists an ‘in-his-shoes’ account of simulation according to which I imagine *myself* in another’s situation and ask what *I* would do, think, or feel (see Goldie, 2000, 177, and Goldie, 2012, 31. See also Feagin, 1996, and Currie and Rovenscroft, 2002). Assuming we are built more or less alike, this can be a very helpful tool. But one will note that it will not do for empathy, running afoul as it does of the requirement that we think and feel as another does. As Goldie puts, we need to “*centrally imagine*” another’s narrative (see Wollheim 1984 for the source of the notion of centrally imagining. For a different interpretation of the role of imagination in empathy, see Zahavi 2008.). As in all cases of simulation, the thoughts, feeling, and desires we imagine are run off-line, disengaged from their standard behavioral outputs. But in the case of empathy, the thoughts, desires, and beliefs I run off-line are those I take to be, for example, Medea’s and not my own. In this limited and fundamentally imaginative sense, her local self-narrative becomes mine. I imagine what would mean to be exposed to the same challenges she is, humiliated, prideful, and enraged just as she is. I thus come to feel as she does not because I project my self into her situation but because I succeed in imagining what it is like to be *her* in *her* situation. In this way I achieve the emotional congruence that is the hallmark of empathy. Or so I imagine. As Susan Feagin notes, ‘empathy’, like ‘simulation’ itself, is a success term: it describes a kind of victory in our attempts to think from the perspective of another and, as a result, feel as they do (Feagin, 1996, 93). There will always be an epistemic question about the criteria we must satisfy to get away with claiming this success. But the idea of coming to feel as another does by virtue of imagining their self-narratives does much to bring the notion of empathy down to earth. And it suffices, I trust, to explain what it means to say that empathy is a form of imaginative, essentially other-directed, perspective-taking.<sup>8</sup>

A confession before I move on. There will be many who would object to the extent to which I make empathy dependent on imagination and narrative (for example, see Walton, 2015, 1-15). I have made it out to be a kind of dramatic reenactment, in thought and feeling, of another’s experience, and there are many emotional experiences that are often called empathic that are much less ‘thoughtful’ than I let on here. An example of this is so-called emotional contagion, such as the feeling of anxiety that overcomes me when in the presence of many anxious sorts, as an emotional analog of what happens when we watch others yawn. Those who wish to call these and similar phenomena cases of empathy are typically impressed with the extraordinary research on mirror-neurons and the extent to which it has shown us that our emotions can mimic those of others in a way that surely does not involve imaginative attention to their self-narratives. Those who are less impressed with it will not wish to call these phenomena ‘empathy’ since none of them requires any significant form of *identification* with another. But this need not concern us. If one wishes to call what I have described not empathy *tout court* but something like ‘higher-level empathy’, that is fine. We will just say that the philosophy of literature, to which I now turn, makes use of a robust sense of empathy, empathy as requiring a healthy dose of imagination and other-directed perspective-taking.

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<sup>8</sup> There is a standing debate on whether ‘empathy’ designates a mental *process* or a mental *state*. See Feagin (2011, 153-5), for a discussion of this. I return to this issue in the conclusion to this chapter.

### III

This discussion of the nature of empathy allows me to say very succinctly what empathy offers the philosophy of literature. First things first, we need to be clear about what aspect of our engagement with literature it stands a chance of illuminating. I will say with little supporting argument that it is not helpful for explaining *criticism* and *interpretation*. A quick look at philosophical studies of the two will reveal little interest in the theory of empathy. And if we turn our attention to the actual practice of academic literary criticism and interpretation, we are likely to meet with derision if we ask what role empathy plays when professionals go about their scholarly business. A professor of English or Comparative Literature is much more likely to write about the cultural, economic, and political conditions that underwrite the production of literary works and movements than he is to explore the feelings literary works produce in readers. But if the concept of empathy may not have much to offer the theory or practice of criticism, it has been given a home in explaining something just as important: the nature of *appreciation*. By linking empathy to appreciation we claim its relevance for explaining at least certain of the characteristic pleasures and values that a standard reader expects to encounter when working through a poem or a novel. I will briefly canvass two ways the theory of empathy has been enlisted to explain these pleasures and values, and I will then suggest a third as deserving of further attention.

It should be little surprise to find that the theory of empathy has been put to greatest use to explain aspects of our emotional engagement with fictional characters. The sheer narrative richness of so much literature, harnessed virtually always to elaborate other perspectives—novels are never about *me*, and most readers must say the same—can make it seem the artform most perfectly matched for empathy. It is the great accomplishment of the realist novel that it has found a way to make the minutia of life a matter of affective concern, bringing together in at times oppressive detail the public and inner lives of its characters. We are often granted access to a character's psychological interior as it registers the significance, both cognitive and emotional, of experience: of the 'doings and sufferings' that appear to be characteristic of creatures such as ourselves. Narrative, as mentioned above, is the standard form in which we articulate the significance of experience, certainly in the folk vocabulary that provides the terms for the vast amount of human communication. The novel's mastery of narrative and its techniques, then, makes it appear especially well-suited for exposing and exploring experience, and thus for offering empathy much of what it needs to enable us to feel 'as and because' another does. And it is not, of course, only the realist novel that can do this. Drama's blending of action and dialogue affords a different, and in no obvious sense lesser, way of making a character available for our empathic engagement. Even the lyric poem, which is often intentionally narratively poor, typically presents us with an 'I' as its expressive core, elaborating perhaps nothing more than an intense perceptual and affective experience. But then reader can engage with the lyric as expressive of a kind of story of this experience, the delineation of another's—the lyric I's—orientation in thought and feeling toward, broadly put, the world. This should suffice to enable forms of empathic identification with the voice that 'sings' the lyric in much poetry.

No one would claim that we empathically identify with all characters in a work, and would claim that our engagement with any one character is from cover to cover empathic. The idea is rather that empathy explains certain specially powerful moments of identification and that this tells us something nontrivial about why we seek out and consume literary narratives (for arguments of this sort but in respect to film, see Smith 1995, 1997, and 2011). We likely do not empathize with Othello while he is smothering Desdemona. But the entire play, it seems, conspires to get us to share in his feelings of disgrace and anguish when a moment later he realizes he took her life because of a lie. This is, we know, the great moment of the play, and empathy can explain in

affective terms how we experience it and many of literature's other great moments. There appears to be empirical evidence that readers negotiate literary narratives by taking up the perspective of the protagonist (see Coplan, 2004, 2006, and 2008), and this makes it seem intuitive to think that the reader is prepared and poised for these great moments of empathetic engagement when they do arrive.<sup>9</sup>

In contemporary philosophy of literature, there is much debate about whether sympathy, which demands much less than empathy in terms of the intimacy of identification, is usually more apt for explaining characteristic forms of character-engagement (see Giovanelli 2008 and 2009. See also Carroll 1990 and 2011, which I discuss below). Often it surely is. But consider the phenomenon, well-known to readers of tragedy, of identifying with characters we take to be morally repugnant (Medea kills her children). This might suggest that the evaluative component typical of sympathy is absent and hence that empathy, which is often happy not to pass judgment, is a better fit for explaining our engagement with all those morally noxious characters who manage to move us so. We imagine ourselves as *them*, in their subject position; and from the first-person point of view, vices and disturbing personal histories rarely present a barrier to identification. Our relationship to certain characters' sins is like our relationship to our own sins: they are, if not excused or accepted, then at least lived with. Reflections such as these invite us to look to empathy rather than to less demanding notions of sympathy, compassion, and (mere) concern when attempting to capture central forms of identification with fictional characters.

The second respect in which empathy has been of interest to philosophers of literature is in the service of defending the *cognitive value* of literary fiction. What kind of knowledge, if any, can we glean from works of literature? To what extent does our imaginative engagement with literature yield *truth*? And how can literature inform us about the real and worldly, pleased as it apparently is to speak instead about the fictional and imaginary? The theory of empathy can seem to offer very precise terms for making sense of the popular idea that, *whatever* literature's precise cognitive value consists in, it will have something to do with its ability to expose us to the experiences of others. As Alex Burri argues, literature offers us a view from *somewhere*, by 'descending in to the subjective view from *here*. (Burri, 2007, 312). This and similar ways of thinking about literature makes an appeal to empathy very attractive to the philosopher who wishes to defend the so-called thesis of literary cognitivism (see Gibson 2007 and 2008). We look to empathy to explain how literature can open us up to the emotional lives of others and, in doing so, yield an important form of humanistic insight.

Call this *experiential* knowledge (some will prefer to call it 'phenomenological knowledge'), and think of it as a broadening of our understanding of both the range of possible human experience and the what-it-is-like to be the subject of these experiences (See Walsh 1969 and Gibson 2008). My own life provides me with no knowledge of what it is like to be one who finds all experience impoverished, as subjecting us to a constant stream of tedious, meaningless, repetition. Nor does it reveal to me what it is like to have my community turn against me and scatter my family across various concentration camps in Poland. But I can read Herman Melville's, *Bartleby the Scrivener* or Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939*. Literature, in this sense, compensates for the hugely limited range of experience the real world offers us, and in doing so it enriches our knowledge of experience itself. Empathy for 'real' people is often thought to yield knowledge. It is clearly thought to offer a

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<sup>9</sup> A potential line of future research would be to extend accounts of empathy with fictional characters to encompass a mode of affective identification with *narrators*. This would be to claim that on occasion readers empathically relate to the emotional state and implied perspective of the fictional (or, depending on one's theory, implied, postulated, or 'effaced') narrator that presents the story itself. Kendall Walton has recently raised this possibility (Walton, 2015, 57).

kind of knowledge of others' mental states, and this is significant enough. But it is often additionally thought that empathy results in a distinct, more general awareness: knowledge, simply put, of the nature of emotional life, of the feelings, desires, and experiences that define us (see Matravers 2011). Literature can offer a kind of sentimental education (Robinson, 2004, 154-194), and empathy, given its particular way of investing us in the perspectives and experiences of others, would appear to have much to offer when we attempt to tell a satisfying story of the cognitive benefits of reading literature. As David Novitz claims, literature gives us "empathic knowledge" insofar as it gives readers a "'pretty good idea' of, or enables them to know something about, what it feels like to be ensnared" in a certain situation (Novitz, 1887, 136. For discussion, see Lamarque, 2014, 137). The basic features of empathy—its reliance on imagination for the sake of other-directed perspective-taking—make it a natural ally in literature's apparent quest to illuminate the nature and variety of human experience.

I will label the third idea I will discuss the 'striking analogy' because I present it as just that, an analogy. I will not say just how seriously we can take the analogy, though it is interesting and discussing it will allow me to conclude this section with a suggestive idea. The striking analogy is in effect this: the terms essential to explaining the nature of empathy are remarkably similar to the terms essential to many accounts of how we engage with literary *works*. The analogy suggests that philosophers of literature should at least consider whether empathy explains not just a manner in which we emotionally identify with characters but something arguably more basic to literary appreciation: a central way in which we come to identify with the literary work of art itself. Literary criticism is littered with descriptions of how a *work* 'thinks' and of the unique purchase a poem, novel, or play offers on its subject matter. Quite beyond the perspectives of the characters we find in the novel, there is the perspective of the novel itself, the precise orientation in thought and feeling the whole of the work appears to offer in respect to some matter of human concern. A literary work bears many properties that the characters who populate it do not, and a good many of these properties are affective and semantic in nature. A poem generates a kind of feeling, a distinct emotional valence, that is embodied in the poem itself, as the affective payoff of the cumulative labor of its individual lines. And when we speak of the 'meaning' of a work, we are asking not what this or that line or sequence of events mean but what *the work* means: what it, and not some element within it, is ultimately 'about.' If *Bartleby the Scrivener* is about alienation, it is not because any of its lines speak about this matter; not a single one does. But the *work* very much seems speak about this, and it does so by virtue of offering a vision of life, a *perspective* on it, in which alienation is foregrounded and made of particular significance (see Gibson, 2007, 123-140). There is a risk of psychologizing here, but it seems natural to say that a poem or a novel *feels* a certain way, *thinks* a certain way, and elaborates a unique perspective. And it would also seem reasonable to suggest that in literary appreciation we frequently come to think and feel *from* the perspective of the work (see Camp 2009). We 'enter' into it, and perhaps even come to identify with it. And note that our manner of engaging with other perspectives, in both empathy and literary appreciation, is fundamentally imaginative. In short, in both literary appreciation and empathy, the phenomenon of imaginative, other-directed perspective-taking might appear to play a central role.

I will leave the analogy here, as a mere item of interest. But it is deserving of further attention. After all, it might illuminate important features of how we engage and identify with literature at the level of work and not just of character. One should suspect that demonstrating that empathy is in some sense central to appreciation—perhaps as marking a characteristic mode of what we might call *work identification*—will be challenging, since it offers as the target of empathy a lifeless thing. But recall that the very concept of empathy was introduced in German aesthetics to explain a way in which we can experience artworks, and in contemporary scholarship there are still champions



of the idea that we can experience empathy with objects as well as with people (see Currie 2011). Some obvious features of our way with literary works lend support to such an idea. It is not just on account of characters that we achieve a sense of ‘knowing’ an artwork intimately, perhaps as though a friend. Artworks, literary included, are objects that are at times experienced *as though* subjects: as centers of feeling and thought which possess something akin to a first-person point of view. Literary works do not, strictly speaking, have experiences, and above I made another’s experiences key to empathic identification. So there is at least one important difference between person-directed empathy and work-directed empathy, if the latter can be said to actually exist. But literary works do possess perspectives as well as a broad array of affective and semantic properties, and this might suffice for turning the striking analogy into a proper theory of how we emotionally engage with works.

#### IV

There are, as always, objections. And in the case the case of empathy, they are often powerful. I will not give these objections a full showing here, but I will try to give the reader a sense of the work that needs to be done to defend any of the above accounts of empathy’s relevance to literary aesthetics. There are three basic arguments I will outline.

The first concerns the idea that empathy designates anything remotely like a *typical* response to fictional characters. I above reserved empathy for explaining those ‘great moments’ in literature, and the clever reader will have worried that those moment occur infrequently. Noël Carroll has developed the most sustained line of attack against the idea readers are often or importantly engaged in empathetic identification with fictional characters (See Carroll 2011, 2001a and 1990). His arguments are not quite attempts to reveal a logical flaw in defenses of empathy’s role in our engagement with characters. Rather, his strategy is to explore a range of representative cases and to cast doubt that in any of them empathy “accounts for our emotional bond with fictional characters.” (Carroll, 2011, 180). We have known since the ancients that our epistemic relationship to literary characters is usually *ironic*, which, in its properly literary sense, means that we know a lot more about characters and their situations know than characters themselves do. We know that Fate will have its way with Oedipus well before he realizes this; and Othello believes Iago honest, whereas we know he is leading him very much astray. As Carroll argues, readers and fictional characters also tend to have different preferences regarding narrative resolution. We do, as consumers of respectable art, wish Othello to learn the horrible truth of his actions; Othello would perhaps prefer a different ending, indeed a different story, altogether (Carroll, 2001a, 231). Observations such as these make it seem that there is rarely the sharing of a single perspective and, consequently, the congruence of affect, that empathy demands. We seldom satisfy the conditions for claiming that we are in any significant sense thinking and feeling from a character’s perspective. Our perspective is largely the third-personal, external standpoint of an observer. If this is so, it is better to say that we *respond* to characters emotionally; we rarely *identify* with them empathically.

One should be to able guess at the nature of counterarguments against enlisting empathy to account for literature’s presumed capacity to offer experiential knowledge. The great problem is simply this: fictional characters, since fictional, do not exist, and as such they can seem ill-suited for teaching us about actual human experience. There is, one might argue, no what-it-is-like to be Medea, since there is no Medea. If there is a truth of the matter when it comes to Medea’s experiences, it would seem a merely fictional truth, and so knowledge of it is bound to be disappointing from the epistemic point of view. Yet it is the entire point of literary cognitivism to

show literature to traffic in *actual* knowledge, genuine truth. One can retreat to the idea that in fictional characters we see reflected something *general* about (real) human experiences. But it turns out to be difficult to make this idea work. What general thing do I see reflected in Medea's experience? That it is painful to be abandoned, that jealousy can bring out the lunatic in us, that children suffer when parents declare war on one another? We surely already knew these things, and it is hard to see why we would value literature for presenting us with quite banal generalities. Moreover, empathy requires, recall, that we consider a character's self-narrative, and if we make the object of cognitive insight this 'general feature' of experience Medea's plight gestures at, we lose both the self and its narrative and so the target of empathy (see Gibson 2008 for a similar criticism. See Gibson 2007, 112-120 for positive account of literature's cognitive value). To be sure, it is hard to understand how empathy could take as its target an abstraction such as a generalized feature of experience

The final counterargument I will consider belongs to Peter Goldie. His position is nuanced and complex, and the best I can do is present the gist of it here. The stance of the first-person is in effect the stance of an *agent*, of a subject who experiences her beliefs, desires, and emotions as standing in a causal relation to action. In Goldie's words, "empathic perspective-shifting is conceptually unable to operate with the appropriately *full-blooded notion of first-personal agency*....it usurps the agent's own first-personal stance toward what he is thinking; only the agent *himself* can take *his* stance towards his own thoughts, decisions, and intentions." (Goldie, 2011, 303) Put crudely, first-personal experience is not just a matter of a subject whose thoughts, feeling, and desires coalesce into a 'state', a perspective she sees as hers. It is not merely to know the content of one's experience and its particular 'feel', which, in principle, could be shared with another. It is the experience of the self *as an agent* that is crucial to the first-person standpoint, and this is utterly lost in our imaginative attempts to run another's mental states off-line. Since the sense of agency is essential to my first-personal point of view, your attempt to assume my point of view will put you in a state that is *of a different kind* from mine, and thus empathy must fail to deliver its promised union with another's subject-position, even in imagination. In a sense this leaves us just where Carroll's arguments do: our relation to characters, fictional or real, is better described as one of emotional *response*, not identification, since we relate to them from an essentially external—at any rate not genuinely first-personal—standpoint.

## V

In conclusion I offer the following reflection. I have mentioned that empathy is often taken to be a success term, used to mark not the attempt to feel from another's perspective but the accomplishment of actually doing so. This coincides with another idea, that empathy designates not the process of imaginative engagement with your feelings, from your perspective, but its *effect*, namely the distinct mental state the process brings about. This are many good reasons for thinking along these lines, but it is, in one sense, a shame. As criticisms such as Goldie's make clear, it may be the case that the process often, perhaps always, fails to yield the desired state. And as criticisms such as Carroll's reveal, in the case of literature we often fall a step short of achieving the requisite congruence empathy, conceived as a state or a 'success term,' demands. We might be demanding too much of empathy and in a manner that occludes much of empathy's affective, cultural, and moral significance, which rests in good part on the process itself. Regardless of whether I ever truly come to *feel* another's emotions, the process—the imaginative project of attempting to grasp that

entanglement of perspective, emotion, and experience that defines another's subject position—would seem productive of very useful information. As philosophers in the hermeneutical and phenomenological traditions at times thought, it is this process, and not simply the state, that introduces us to the *intersubjective* dimension of experience (see Zahavi 2010 and Steuber 2008). The process itself can attune us to the fact that others are bearers of inner lives and centers of affective gravity. Regardless of the state produced, learning and refining such a mode of imaginative engagement with the first-personal dimension of others' experiences would likely itself be worth the price of admission. The process of simply attempting to empathize with another, in both literature and life, has the value of opening our eyes to others as subjects, and it calls on us to entertain the possibility that our perspectives are contingent and, well, merely ours. Even if just as a process, empathy would seem a powerful tool of acculturation, and to yield a significant kind of moral insight. Literature, one suspects, could play a significant role to play in the exercising and refinement of such a capacity.

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