

# Philosophy and Literature and the Crisis of Metaphysics

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L'ontologie spinozienne englobe et dépasse aussi bien les catégories esthétiques du sublime et du grotesque, que les catégories philosophiques du spiritualisme et du matérialisme. L'admiration que lui porte Flaubert réside précisément dans cette souplesse, à l'image de l'esthétique flaubertienne qui ne choisit pas entre le lyrisme et l'ironie, entre la platitude et l'élévation, entre la surface et la profondeur, entre le réalisme et le romantisme. Aussi souhaiterais-je nuancer le point de vue de Boris Lyon-Caen qui, dans son bel essai *Balzac et la comédie des signes*, présente Flaubert comme le précurseur d'une esthétique réaliste et matérialiste de l'immanence, attentive à la seule superficialité des choses, nivelant, aplanissant tout<sup>50</sup>. «L'étalement d'un plan commun d'immanence»<sup>51</sup> qui selon Deleuze est au principe de l'ontologie spinozienne, et que l'on retrouve au cœur de l'esthétique flaubertienne, n'exclut nullement, en philosophie comme en littérature, un «vertige de l'immanence»<sup>52</sup> – autre formule employée par Deleuze au sujet de Spinoza. Bouvard et Pécuchet, au terme de leur lecture certes cursive et superficielle de *L'Éthique*, n'ont-ils pas le sentiment du gouffre, l'intuition de l'insondable?

## Can Literature Be Moral Philosophy? A Sceptical View on the Ethics of Literary Empathy

### I. Literature as Moral Philosophy and the Role of Empathy<sup>1</sup>

Since the times of Plato and Aristotle there have been two opposite views on the role of literature in moral life. On the one hand, Plato rejects fiction, mainly for three reasons. Fiction is a biased representation of the world that leads to confusion and deception; it exalts the lowest part of the soul, i.e., the passions; and it enhances irresponsible behaviour. Aristotle's account of fiction is, on the other hand, more benevolent. Fiction relates what may happen and what is possible at any time and place, and it affects the spectator's or reader's thoughts about what is probable. Imagining the probable acquaints us with other points of view, other worlds and situations that otherwise would remain unknown to us. Fiction is therefore a way to extend the horizon of our thoughts, feelings and experiences, to develop a more considered view of similar situations in real life and to sharpen our moral sensibility. Central to Aristotle's account is the idea that we are able to adopt the point of view of fictional characters and understand their circumstances from an embedded perspective. This debate on the role of fiction in human life demonstrates its continuing relevance. This quarrel was developed further by those authors who saw in a specific form of fiction – in literature – the potential for a 'sentimental education,' as well by those thinkers from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Victorian period who distrusted fiction precisely for its capacity to corrupt human nature<sup>2</sup>.

Defenders as well as detractors of fiction seem to agree on one point: fiction has the power to enlarge our experiential horizon, influence our feelings, thoughts and actions, and it is a strong instrument to mould us as moral beings. Fiction is a kind of 'moral laboratory' in which we experience situations that are similar to real life; we learn by watching the emotional development of the characters and by responding emotionally to them<sup>3</sup>. In recent times this idea has

<sup>49</sup> Smar, *Œuvres de jeunesse*, Claudine Gothot-Mersch & Guy Sagnes (éds.), Paris: Gallimard, coll. «La Pléiade», 2001, p. 575.

<sup>50</sup> Voir le chapitre intitulé «L'horizon Flaubert», *Balzac et la comédie des signes. Essai sur une expérience de pensée*, Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, coll. «La Philosophie hors de soi», 2006, pp. 146–151.

<sup>51</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza. Philosophie pratique*, p. 164.

<sup>52</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, Paris: Minuit, 1991, p. 50: «Spinoza, c'est le vertige de l'immanence auquel tant de philosophes tentent en vain d'échapper.»

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Sonia Montoya, Amanda Edmonds and Sebastian Hüsch for her help in the elaboration of this article. Work on this article was supported by a grant from the DFG - Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for the project entitled 'Emotion, Fantasy and Fiction' in which I have been working during the period 2008–2011.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account on this topic: Cf. Suzan Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of Fiction as a moral laboratory can be found explicitly in Zola and Musil (Jemeljan Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2000, p. 11). For a detailed account of this kind of 'sentimental education' Cf. Jenefer Robinson, "L'Education Sentimentale", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 73, 1995, pp. 212–226.

been the focus of attention for some contemporary philosophers such as Rorty, Nussbaum, Feagin, Robinson and Gaut, for psychoanalytical authors such as Oatley and Gohlmain, as well as the object of empirical research conducted by Hakemulder and Keen.

Among these authors, Martha Nussbaum developed an accurate account of the moral value of literature following the ideas outlined by Aristotle. In *The Fragility of Goodness*, *Love's Knowledge*, *Poetic Justice* and *Cultivating Humanity* she defended the thesis that literature – and especially novels – should be regarded as a form of moral philosophy, and that novels should be included in the study of moral philosophical questions<sup>4</sup>. Faithful to the Aristotelian tradition, Nussbaum claims that by reading literature we gain an understanding of a situation from different points of view. We also realise that human beings belonging to very different times, places, and social and cultural environments are not very different from us. The detailed descriptions in the novel offer a privileged field to investigate moral problems similar to our every day lives, such as the fragility of moral characters, the noncommensurability of valuable things, and the ethical importance of the emotions<sup>5</sup>. According to the author the novel stimulates our moral imagination, it makes us attentive to certain aspects and it enhances practical reasoning, moral perception and the ability to empathize with other minds<sup>6</sup>.

One important aspect of Nussbaum's thesis on the moral value of literature concerns precisely this last point: the power of literature to enhance our ability to empathize with other minds. This aspect will be the focus of the current article. My aim is to reflect upon the question regarding the moral value of our empathy for fictional characters. The article is structured in two main parts. I will first examine the concept of 'empathy' and distinguish between empathy for human beings and empathy for fictional characters. I will call the latter 'literary empathy'. In the second part of the paper I will examine the arguments for and against the double thesis that reading literature enhances our ability to feel empathy, and that feeling empathy prompts altruistic behaviour.

<sup>4</sup> A similar, although more radical, thesis has been defended by Richard Rorty. While Nussbaum claims that the novel should be included as a way to do moral philosophy, Rorty claims that moral philosophical text should be replaced by novels. According to Rorty the aim of moral philosophy is to enlarge our perspectives, feelings and thoughts and reading novels is a good way to learn about other ways of thinking and feeling (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 35–45.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Valdecantos, "La fragilidad de la Ficción", *Isegoría*, 11, 1995, pp. 214–217.

## II. The Meanings of Empathy: Towards an Operative Definition

According to Nussbaum one of the reasons the novel is morally valuable is that it promotes empathy. The author nevertheless does not expound in detail on the meaning of this concept. It seems to me that if we want to understand our empathy for fictional characters we should first clarify which kind of mental act we have in mind when we speak about empathy. In this section I will try to offer an operative definition of this concept.

'Empathy' can be used both in a broad and narrow sense. In a broad sense it denotes the general ability to become emotionally involved with other minds – no matter if these minds are real or just imagined, as in the case of our involvement with narrative worlds. There is, however, a wide range of phenomena that express different kinds and degrees of involvement with other minds. These phenomena can be – and often are – related to each other, even though they are different in nature.

I will start with a characterisation of *emotional contagion*. In emotional contagion a person is sad and then we also feel sad when we see him or her, so that we have the same feeling. This process takes place on an unconscious level and so it is not necessary that we understand why the other person is feeling sad. In a spontaneous way we feel the same feeling as him or her; we adopt his or her feeling as if it were our own<sup>7</sup>.

A related phenomenon consists of *putting oneself in the shoes of another person*. In this case we are able to imagine how another person is feeling. This phenomenon should be distinguished from the phenomenon of emotional contagion in two respects. On the one hand, while emotional contagion does not require that we understand the reasons why another person is feeling a certain way, some kind of understanding of the other person's situation is necessary in order to put oneself in his or her shoes. On the other hand, while in emotional contagion we adopt the feeling of the other person as our own feeling, when we put ourselves in the shoes of another, we are able to identify, recognize and understand the other person's feelings, but we do not necessarily adopt them as our own feelings. When we put ourselves in the shoes of another, we imagine having his experiences, desires and feelings, and we are able to adopt his perspective without losing our own<sup>8</sup>.

Another phenomenon that expresses our engagement in the mental life of other minds is *feeling one with the other*. In this case we feel in community with another human being and because of that we can share the same emotional experience. In this case the boundaries between both subjects have disappeared and

<sup>7</sup> Max Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, GW 7, Bern & München: Francke Verlag, 1973; Matthias Schloßberger, *Die Erfahrung des Anderen. Gefühle im menschlichen Miteinander*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005, p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> Margit Sutrop, *Fiction and Imagination*, Paderborn: Mentis, 2000, pp. 211–212.

the difference between the one who empathizes and the one who is the object of our empathy is overcome<sup>9</sup>.

Some authors speak about *identification* to express our affective engagement with other minds. Even though the first theory of identification with fictional characters was offered by Plato and developed later by Aristotle<sup>10</sup>, it was Freud who articulated a detailed account of the mechanisms of identification with literary and dramatic characters<sup>11</sup>. The Freudian theory was very influential and – despite all the criticism it has received – it has nevertheless been the object of further development by authors in the field of Aesthetics, such as Norman Holland<sup>12</sup>, Jauss in his theory of the forms of aesthetic identification<sup>13</sup> and in recent times by analytical philosophers such as Oatley, Gholamain and Bery Gaut<sup>14</sup>.

The concept of identification, however, is very problematic. It does not always imply an affective involvement with other minds. It is too vague and diffuse, and it is charged with psychoanalytical connotations. Further concerns about this term have been pointed out by Wollheim. He claims that speaking about identification with a fictional character implies that we are identical to this character and therefore the character is identical to us. Identification is therefore a symmetrical relation. This would mean that the character also has my life, and this is of course not possible<sup>15</sup>. Noel Carroll is also critical of the concept of identification. He claims that the reader or spectator has “a sense of the character’s internal understanding of the situation” and assimilates the character’s situation, but that the reader and character do not have the same mental state<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*.

<sup>10</sup> Noël Carroll, “Art, Narrative and Emotion”, *Emotion and the Arts*, Mette Hjort & Sue Laver (eds.), New York: Oxford University Press 1997, p. 200.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Psychopathische Personen auf der Bühne”, *Sudienausgabe, X: Bildende Kunst und Literatur*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982. Also Sigmund Freud, “Der Dichter und das Phantasieren”, *Sudienausgabe, X: Bildende Kunst und Literatur*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Oatley “A Taxonomy of the emotions of literary response and a theory of identification in fictional narrative”, *Poetics* 23, 1994; Keith Oatley & Mitra Gholamain “Emotions and identification: Connections between readers and fiction”, *Emotion and the arts*, Mette Hjort & Sue Laver (eds.), New York: Oxford University Press, 1997; Berys Gaut, “Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film”, *Passionate views. Film, Cognition and Emotion*, Carl Plantinga & Greg M. Smith (eds.) John Hopkins University Press, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984; Margit Surtrop, *Fiction and Imagination*, Paderborn: Mentis, 2000, pp. 194–201.

<sup>16</sup> Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 95 and Carroll “Art, Narrative and Emotion”, p. 204

More interesting for the purposes of this article is the difference between empathy and sympathy. Tracing the distinction between the two will allow us to elaborate a narrow use of the concept of empathy. The distinction between the two phenomena is quite recent. Philosophers such as Adam Smith once used the term sympathy to speak about what we now call empathy. The word empathy has a recent origin in the German aesthetic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. First introduced by Theodor Lipps, it was developed further by philosophers of the phenomenological school, especially Edith Stein.

How are we to distinguish between sympathy and empathy?

According to Keen sympathy is when person A feels an emotion about the feelings of person B, for example, when ‘I feel pity for your pain’<sup>17</sup>. This phenomenon is closely related to the phenomenon of compassion because in most cases we feel sympathy for negative emotions. But is sympathy always directed towards negative emotions? Here the opinions are divided. On the one hand, some philosophers seem to defend the claim that sympathy is directed uniquely towards negative emotions<sup>18</sup>. Sklar, for example, characterises sympathy as having the following traits: 1) awareness of suffering as something to be alleviated, 2) judgement of the unfairness of suffering; 3) negative feelings on behalf of the sufferer; 4) desire to help<sup>19</sup>. On the other hand, the claim that sympathy can also be directed towards positive emotions has also found its defenders<sup>20</sup>. There is for instance a moderated view defended by Aristotle and Adam Smith, according to which sympathy can be directed towards negative or positive feelings, even though it is mostly directed towards the negative ones. This last view seems to me more plausible, because even though sympathy is mostly directed towards negative feelings, we can also react with sympathy to the positive emotions of others.

When person A feels what person B feels we refer in the current debate to *empathy*. For example, it is empathy when ‘I feel your pain’<sup>21</sup>. How to understand this sentence?

The nature of empathy continues to be debated, with authors questioning to what extent we imagine the feelings of the other person, perceive them directly, experience mental simulations of them, or just infer them from some external signals.

It is also unclear to what extent our empathetic feeling is of the same kind as the feeling of the person with whom we empathize. That is, when I feel your pain, am I myself in pain? Or is the feeling that I have about your pain of an-

<sup>17</sup> Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Howard Sklar, *The Art of Sympathy*, Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2008, p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Sklar, *The Art of Sympathy*, pp. 48–49.

<sup>20</sup> Alessandro Giovannelli “In Sympathy with Narrative Characters”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67, 2009, pp. 83–95.

<sup>21</sup> Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 5.

other kind than yours, so that when I feel your pain, I am in another kind of emotional state different than pain?

The point of view that I will adopt here is that when I feel empathy for the emotions of another person, I do not have the same emotion but a *similar* emotional state. This view is sustained by two arguments. First, when A empathizes with B, A is conscious that the empathized emotion that he feels has its origins in the psychic life of person B. Second, it is much easier to control the empathized emotion than the non-empathized one. We feel our empathized emotions with more distance than the emotions that do not have their origin in an act of empathy.

In a narrow sense empathy is not itself an emotion, rather it is subject A's affective ability to feel the emotions of B. A's empathized emotions are similar counterparts to the original emotions of B. They are nevertheless felt as the emotions of B – but the boundaries between empathizer subject and the empathized object are not overcome – and therefore the empathized emotions are experienced as easier to control.

### III. Empathy and Literary Empathy: Tracing the Distinction

The operative characterisation of empathy elaborated in the last section should help to determine with more precision if Nussbaum's thesis is correct in maintaining that literature is morally valuable because it enhances our ability to empathize. Nussbaum takes for granted that empathy for fictional characters is subject to the same logic as our empathy for real others. In fact the kernel of her claim lies precisely in the supposition that reading literature fosters our ability to feel empathy for fictional characters and that this enhances our ability to empathize with real other minds. Rorty and Walton have also defended a similar claim<sup>22</sup>. Despite the intuitive appeal of this claim, my aim in this section is to call this hypothesis into question: Is the ability to feel empathy for real persons and the ability to feel empathy for fictional characters of the same kind, or should we speak about a categorical difference? Is 'literary empathy' subjected to the same logic as the empathy for real fellow men? There are at least four aspects that distinguish our empathy for real others from our empathy for fictional characters.

#### *Moral Implications*

One important difference between real life empathy and literary empathy is that, at least at first sight, the empathy for fictional characters does not have moral implications. Susan Feagin summarizes this point as follows: "the pleasures and

<sup>22</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*; Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Harvard University Press, 1990.

pains of fictional characters [...] have no moral implications [...]"<sup>23</sup>. According to this view we can sympathise – and also empathize – with morally bad characters and share their desires without calling into question our own morality.

However, though it seems natural that we can share the feelings and desires of morally questionable characters without necessarily feeling uncomfortable about this experience as long as we know the character to be purely fictional, we should be careful in asserting Feagin's thesis. Our involvement with fiction is not always so innocent. As Hillis, Miller and Sklar pointed out, there is a link between our feelings for fictional objects and our actions in real life. Even though we cannot act in the fictional world, our feelings towards it have the power to influence our thoughts, feelings, desires and actions in real life<sup>24</sup>.

It seems to me that the difference between our ability to empathize with fictional characters and our ability to empathize with real fellow men that are morally different from us is a matter of degree rather than an essential difference. It is right that we feel more freedom to empathize with morally different fictional minds than with morally different real others. However, our ability to empathize with morally different minds is not unlimited; sometimes we can refuse to feel empathy for characters that are morally unacceptable to us. This happens in cases of 'imaginative resistance'. Moreover, our literary empathy can also influence our actions and thoughts in real life, so that we cannot speak here of a lack of moral consequences.

#### *Link to Action*

This last point mentioned above opens the discussion to a further difference between the two kinds of empathy, this time concerning their link to action. Some philosophers have claimed that our emotions for fictional characters differ from our real life emotions because the former do not induce us to act. Walton, for example, defends the widespread view that fictional emotions do not motivate actions while real emotions do<sup>25</sup>. Others like Radford go a step further and speak about the practical irrationality of fictional emotions<sup>26</sup>.

A similar thesis can be applied to the case of empathy. According to this view the emotions aroused by empathising with fictional characters do not motivate action, while real emotions do. Literary empathy would lack then the link with action. In this sense, Yanal speaks about our emotions for fictional charac-

<sup>23</sup> Susan Feagin, "Imagining Emotions and Appreciating Fiction", *Emotion and the Arts*, Mette Hjort & Sue Laver (eds.), New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, p. 4; Sklar, *The Art of Sympathy*, p. 60

<sup>25</sup> Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*

<sup>26</sup> Colin Radford, "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 49, 1975.

ters as 'unconsummated' and 'ineffectual'<sup>27</sup>. The same view is also shared by Susan Feagin<sup>28</sup>. To what extent is our fictional involvement ineffectual?

In the preceding section I have defended the notion that our fictional involvement can influence us to act in the real world. Peter Goldie and Richard Moran also defend the claim that fictional emotions can motivate action, even though the link to action is not as direct as in the case of our emotions about real life<sup>29</sup>. It is a matter of fact that after being involved with a narrative we may tend to act in a different way in the real world. For example, after reading a fictional narrative about members of a minority group, our thoughts, feelings, desires and actions towards this minority in real life can change.

But what becomes of our empathized emotions towards fictional objects and situations? In this case there is also a link with action. We are not able to intervene directly in the fictional world, but nevertheless our response may prompt us to act in the real one. Hillis Miller speaks about the 'performative force' of the emotions aroused by reading<sup>30</sup>. Sklar also defends a similar view when he claims "Motivated by the fictional world, they [the feelings] sometimes find their outlet outside the fictional world, in the fabric of our lives"<sup>31</sup>. The same idea is also expressed in Currie's 'transfer strategy' according to which "we experience genuine emotions when we encounter fiction, but their relation to the story is causal rather than intentional; the story provokes thoughts about real people and situations, and these are the intentional objects of our emotions"<sup>32</sup>. According to this view our empathized emotions can also motivate us to action in the same manner that real emotions do, but this link to action may not be so direct as in the case of our emotions about real others. In this case we also have to speak about a difference of degree rather than an essential difference.

There is another point in which both kinds of empathy differ only in degree. Our emotions towards real life objects and situations do not always motivate us to action. The claim that emotions and empathy about reality both motivate action should therefore be revisited because we are not always moved to act despite feelings of empathy for real others.

<sup>27</sup> Robert J. Yanal, *Paradoxes of Emotion and Fiction*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, pp. 101–123.

<sup>28</sup> Yanal, *Paradoxes of Emotion and Fiction*, p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Moran, "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination", *The Philosophical Review* 103, 1994, pp. 75–106; Peter Goldie, "Narrative, Emotion and Perspective", *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts*, Matthew Kieran & D. McIver Lopes (eds.), London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 54–68.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, *The Ethics of Literature*, p. 76.

<sup>31</sup> Sklar, *The Art of Sympathy*, p. 60.

<sup>32</sup> Greg Currie, *The Nature of Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 88.

### *Knowledge from the inside and the Role of the Imagination*

There is a further difference between empathy for real human beings and empathy for fictional characters. In the case of literary empathy we are acquainted with the mental life of the characters in a way that is generally not possible for real human beings. We know the thoughts, feelings and desires of fictional characters 'from the inside'<sup>33</sup>, because the author of the fictional narrative gives us this information about them. In real life, on the contrary, we have to make inferences and deduce from the behaviour of other human beings why they feel, think or desire in a certain way. Rarely do we possess precise and detailed information 'from the inside' about our fellow men and women.

Furthermore, our literary empathy is often grounded in our fantasies about the inner life of the characters and we feel free to project our wishes and emotions onto them. We imagine their mental states and we do not necessarily believe in them<sup>34</sup>. This strong role played by the imagination in the case of literary empathy does not give us, however, the feeling that we are mistaken about their mental states. In empathising with real human beings, on the contrary, we are more cautious to project our own mental states into them when we interpret their actions, thoughts and feelings. Real people seem to be richer in details and more complex. We do not have a global view of them and we avoid projecting our wishes and feelings when we empathize with them.

Is this an essential difference or a matter of degree? In this case it is once again a matter of degree. As I pointed out before researchers continue to dispute to what extent we feel empathy for real persons, we really simulate their mental states or we perceive directly what they feel. If we accept the view that at least a partial role of the imagination as simulation is required when empathising with other minds – real or fictional – then the boundary between literary empathy and empathy for real others is not fundamental.

### *Interaction and Reciprocity*

A further difference concerns the possibility of interaction and reciprocity. Normally we are able to interact with real human beings for whom we feel empathy. The possibility of interaction and reciprocity is, nevertheless, excluded when we feel empathy for fictional characters<sup>35</sup>. For obvious reasons we cannot expect our love or our hate for a fictional character to be reciprocated. In this point there is a radical difference between the two types of empathy.

In line with the above reflections, we might ask whether the difference between our empathy for real characters and literary empathy is an essential one? My claim is that the difference between real life empathy and literary empathy is a matter of degree. We do not have enough evidence to speak about a generic,

<sup>33</sup> Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*.

<sup>34</sup> Feagin "Imagining Emotions and Appreciating Fiction", p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction*, Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 7.

substantial and categorical difference between the two kinds of empathy. In both cases we are making use of the same affective ability: our ability to empathize with other minds – real or fictional. Literary empathy should be regarded as a subtype of empathy for other minds in general. As a subtype of affective ability it has its own characteristics and its specific mechanisms, but they do not differ from the more general ability to empathize with other minds. Both are processes of the same nature, even though they are not completely identical.

#### IV. The Ethics of Literary Empathy: A Sceptical Point of View

In what follows I want to examine the assumptions implicit in Nussbaum's thesis that reading literature is morally valuable – among other things – because it enlarges our ability to empathize with our real fellow men and women. My aim is to present strong counter-arguments supporting a sceptical point of view about the capacity of literature to enlarge our ability to empathize with real human beings.

##### *Literary Empathy, Real Life Empathy and Pro-social Behaviour*

One of the main assumptions in Nussbaum's claim is that feeling empathy for fictional characters also enhances our ability to empathize with real human beings. Is there a link between our literary empathy and our empathy for our real fellow men and women? Can we say that literary empathy promotes pro-social behaviour and altruism?

At a conceptual level I showed before that literary empathy and real life empathy are processes of the same nature, although they are not identical. It is therefore suspicious that one can have the same consequences as the other as far as pro-social behaviour is concerned.

Empirical research done in this field by Hakemulder and Keen shows that reading enhances our ability to *understand* the thoughts, feelings and motives of other human beings<sup>36</sup>. Both authors, however, express criticism about the claim that literary empathy improves real life empathy and pro-social behaviour. We must distinguish carefully here between the ability to *understand* other minds and the ability to *empathize* with them. Even though the ability to empathize requires the ability to understand, empathy is more than understanding the mental life of our fellow men and women.

Hakemulder summarizes this point as follows:

Reading offers a unique opportunity to study people's motivations and emotions 'from within,' thus enhancing an understanding of our fellow human beings. Presumably, this understanding has some beneficial effects.

<sup>36</sup> Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*, p. 13, p. 50, p. 52; Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 105.

Several philosophers and literary scholars have argued that identification with characters enriches our moral awareness. While reading we find ourselves in the shoes of a wide diversity of people. Thus, we get better and better at understanding moral situations from different points of view. In addition, we may come to see that people belonging to some outgroup are actually not much different from us. This may be the psychological basis for social solidarity.<sup>37</sup>

Hakemulder reports that reading enhances our ability to understand other minds, their thoughts and feelings, and that it enhances our ability to put ourselves in the shoes of other persons. Reading can also change our norms and values and improve our self-knowledge<sup>38</sup>. This, in turn, contributes to our acting in certain ways. But despite these results, he found no evidence for the thesis that reading novels induces moral reflection, promotes moral imagination, and directly enhances pro-social behaviour<sup>39</sup>.

Keen also does not find evidence for a link between reading novels and pro-social behaviour. Readers of novels report that they do not consider themselves better people after reading and identifying with fictional characters<sup>40</sup>. This author claims that empathizing with fictional characters can even induce *non*-social behaviour<sup>41</sup>. For example, it can lead us to damage the object of our empathy, because identifying with him causes us pain. It can also induce us to focus on some aspects and necessities of the object, for which we feel empathy, and to leave other aspects unattended to. Finally, it can also cause us to reject empathising with other minds – fictional or real.

Nussbaum is conscious of these potential objections to her thesis. In *Poetic Justice* she claims that empathy is not enough to induce moral behaviour. Discussion with other readers of the novel is also necessary in order to induce a moral reflection about the feelings and thoughts generated by the novel, and in order to develop our moral abilities<sup>42</sup>. She takes this idea from Booth's concept of 'co-duction'.

To conclude this section, it would appear that there is no evidence for the thesis that literary empathy prompts empathy for real others and pro-social behaviour, even though reading novels improves our capacity to understand other minds. Furthermore, the effects of novels on our behaviour are only marginal compared to other influences, such as education or the environment. The link between literary empathy and real life altruism should therefore be regarded with scepticism.

<sup>37</sup> Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*, p. 97.

<sup>38</sup> Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*, p. 117.

<sup>39</sup> Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*, p. 112.

<sup>40</sup> Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 99.

<sup>41</sup> Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 145.

<sup>42</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

*Empathy for Similar Selves, Out-Group Empathy and Reading Literature as Extension of Life*

Another important aspect of Nussbaum's thesis is that literature enlarges our horizon of experiences, and acquaints us with human realities, which are distant in space and time, that otherwise would remain unknown to us. She claims: "Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling"<sup>43</sup>. This extension of our experiential horizon can take place in two directions: horizontally "bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met" and also "vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life"<sup>44</sup>. Implicit in this claim is the idea that we are able to empathize with literary characters that are very different from us and therefore do not belong to the same in-group.

Some questions arise with respect to this point: Can we feel empathy for literary characters with whom we do not have much in common? Can literary empathy call to us across boundaries of difference or are we only able to empathize with those who are similar to us? Only if literary empathy is possible for those who are very different from us can we speak about literature as allowing us to expand our experiential horizon.

Empirical work on this question has been done by Keen and Hakemulder. To address this question Keen distinguishes three different kinds of empathy<sup>45</sup>:

- a. Bounded strategic empathy operates with an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others.
- b. Ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end.
- c. Broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes (universalizing).<sup>46</sup>

Only the third kind of empathy enlarges our horizon, i.e. only a fraction of our empathetic capacities acquaints us with human realities different from our own.

Hakemulder's empirical research shows that readers of novels experience serious difficulties empathising with characters with whom they do not have much in common, for example, with 'bad characters'<sup>47</sup>. From a theoretical point of view this difficulty has in philosophy been called the phenomenon of 'imaginative resistance', and it has recently been the object of several studies. The reader does not always follow the indications of the author to imagine specific contexts

<sup>43</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, p. 48.

<sup>45</sup> Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 142 and pp. 170–171.

<sup>46</sup> Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, pp. 170–171.

<sup>47</sup> Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*.

and situations. While we do not have any difficulty imagining worlds that are very different from ours, we are able to reject imagining what the author wants us to imagine when this goes against our moral principles. The readers are in these cases reluctant to imagine certain things that go against their own moral norms and values. This imaginative resistance is an obstacle to putting ourselves in the shoes of characters whose feelings, thoughts and actions are beyond our moral norms and values. In this case, the possibility of amplifying our horizon of sentiments is not achieved.

Furthermore, there are two assumptions implicit in Nussbaum's claim that should be considered more deeply. The first hypothesis is that through the power of imagination, human beings are able to have experiences that they otherwise would not have had. In this case we are able to learn about other lives and worlds by reading. In this aspect Nussbaum's view is opposed to Kant's and Jung's thesis, according to which one is able to experience in fantasy only what one is already acquainted with. Her claim, however, is supported by other philosophers such as Schwarz<sup>48</sup>. From my point of view it is plausible to think that by reading literature and empathising with fictional characters we can experience emotions that we had not experienced before in real life. In this sense there is nothing controversial in the thesis that reading literature amplifies the range of our sentiments and our experiential horizon.

The second hypothesis implicit in Nussbaum's claim is that the experiences that we have in the imagination are able to ground in us psychic dispositions, i.e., that they are similar to our real life experiences and that the feelings, thoughts, and desires that we have reading books influence us and mould our characters as if they were experiences in real life. This second assumption is more problematic. Even though it is a common claim that literature has the power to mould our character, there is no evidence for the thesis that experiences in the imagination have the same effects as real life experiences<sup>49</sup>. We should distinguish here between our ability to have new experiences reading books and the capacity of these new experiences to mould and build our mental lives. It seems to me that the emotions experienced reading literature remain on the surface of our psychic life. We experience them more distantly and less firmly than the emotions aroused by real events, people and situations. They are in fact felt with a different quality – less firm and solid as Hume pointed out – and they seem to be under the power of our control.

<sup>48</sup> Ernst Schwarz, "Über Phantasiegefühle", *Archiv für systematische Philosophie*, 12, 1906, p. 88.

<sup>49</sup> Schwarz, "Über Phantasiegefühle", p. 102; Robert Saxinger, "Gefühlssuggestion und Phantasiegefühl", *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane*, 46, 1908, p. 406. Cf. For a detailed account: Ingrid Vendrell Ferran, "Ästhetische Erfahrung und Quasi-Gefühl", *The Aesthetics of the Graz School. Meinong Studien IV/ Meinong Studies IV*, Venanzio Raspa (ed.) Ontos Verlag, 2010., pp. 129–168



### *Empathy and the Moral Effects of Literature*

The question now arises regarding the 'moral effects' of reading literature and of literary empathy. Nussbaum claims that reading literature sharpens our perceptive abilities, awareness and moral imagination; it enlarges our experiential horizon and it sharpens our practical reasoning. My aim in this section is to examine in more detail the plausibility of this claim.

First of all, we should pay attention to the concept of 'moral effect'. When Nussbaum speaks about the 'moral effects' inspired by Aristotle, she has in mind those abilities that we must develop in order to live a good life. However, it is important to distinguish between different meanings of the concept of 'moral effect' in a way that Nussbaum does not. Hakemulder's reflections are illuminating in this aspect. He distinguishes three possible effects of literature: ethical, moral and pre-ethical.

- *Ethical effects* are those that enhance ethical reflection, that is, a reflection about our actions from the point of view of our values and norms, good and evil, responsibility and choice<sup>50</sup>. According to Hakemulder reading literature contributes a deeper insight into human nature and enhances moral self-knowledge.
- *Moral effects* are those that persuade in favour of a specific moral position and accepted norms in a community. Hakemulder finds evidence for the power of literature in sharpening our perception of norms of behaviour and in influencing our actions.
- This author preserves the term *pre-ethical effects* for the enhancement of abilities that are likely to help us in making ethical inquiries<sup>51</sup>. He detects that reading literature enhances our abilities to make inferences about the emotions and thoughts others have, it acquaints readers with other moral perspectives and it sharpens our ability to think about ethical topics.

Despite these effects Hakemulder is cautious in subscribing to Nussbaum's thesis. All these effects are 'short-term effects'<sup>52</sup> and he is sceptical about Nussbaum's assertion of the power of literature to enhance enduring ethical dispositions of mind.

### *Self-Indulgence and Selfish Sentimentalism*

Another kind of concern about the moral effects of literature arises from the theoretical standpoint of Brecht's theatre theory. While Nussbaum thinks that feeling empathy can induce moral reflection about real life situations and move us to altruistic actions, Brecht claimed that empathy with fictional characters would induce self-indulgence rather than moral reflection and action.

<sup>50</sup> Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>51</sup> Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory*, p. 167.

Instead of identification, Brecht intends to make the audience experience detachment and alienation towards the characters. He calls this alienation effect 'estrangement effect' or 'V-Effekt' (*Verfremdungseffekt*)<sup>53</sup>. In the theatre, only estrangement – he extends this thesis to other arts also<sup>54</sup> – induces ethical reflection and action. The theatre has to wonder, surprise, and challenge the audience. It has to present quotidian things in a different light, induce the audience to reflect about them and invite them to act in favour of social change<sup>55</sup>. In contrast, identification – empathy in our terms – prompts self-indulgence and makes the audience think the situation is unchangeable. Moreover, while the audience attends to their own emotional responses, which are socially and culturally determined, other qualities of the fiction and the message implicit in it remain unattended to<sup>56</sup>. Brecht's model of identification can be criticised because he links this concept too strongly with the concepts of escapism and conformism, and he interprets identification as ideologically biased. But aside from this possible criticism, Brecht's theory makes us aware that empathy with fictional characters is not always a desired effect because it is culturally and socially mediated and because it does not necessarily incite us to social action.

There is another worry concerning the ethics of literary empathy that I want to mention briefly in this article and that is closely related to Brecht's concerns. Some authors such as James, Dickens and Ruskin are concerned about the possibility that empathising with characters and problems of fiction make us indifferent to the real sufferings and troubles of our fellow men. In these cases we are very sensitive to the suffering of fictional characters, but we are indifferent to real human beings. The worry here is that we involve ourselves with fictional worlds with the intention of having feelings towards fictional characters. We enjoy feeling pity and sorrow for them, but we reject those feelings when the others are real human beings. As Susan Feagin pointed out using the words of John Ruskin, this is the case of the "selfish sentimentalist"<sup>57</sup>. Feagin describes this possible phenomenon as follows:

One can weep, groan, and cringe over a novel or in the theatre, but remain blasé if the fictional events were to occur in reality. The pride one feels in

<sup>53</sup> Bertold Brecht, "Kleines Organon für das Theater", *Versuche* 27/32, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1953, p. 110, p. 114.

<sup>54</sup> Brecht, "Kleines Organon für das Theater", p. 139.

<sup>55</sup> Brecht, "Kleines Organon für das Theater", p. 125.

<sup>56</sup> Brecht, "Kleines Organon für das Theater", p. 123.

<sup>57</sup> Susan Feagin, "The Pleasures of Tragedy", *Philosophy of Literature. Contemporary and Classic Readings*, Eileen John & D. McIver Lopes (eds.), Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. Also in William James' *Habit* (1914) and Dickens' *Bleak House* according to Mary-Catherine Harrison, "The Paradox of Fiction and The Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dicken's Realism", *Narrative*, Vol 16, 2008, pp. 256–278.

one's theatre tears is a selfish pride, and has actually very little to do with any concern for human welfare, or, consequently one's virtue [...].<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps we do not always develop a strong sensibility for fictional characters to the detriment of our real life sympathy. Nevertheless, it is possible to develop aesthetic pleasure in feeling sorrow, pity, and empathy for fictional characters while avoiding feeling touched by the destinies of real men.

This brings me back to the question with which I started the article. The question of whether literature can be moral philosophy has several aspects, and in this article I focused only on the role of empathy for fictional characters in fostering 'moral effects'. We are able now to answer this question. According to my point of view there is no doubt that our empathy for fictional characters is morally valuable: it enhances our ability to understand other minds and it acquaints us with other realities. Nevertheless, given that literary empathy has its own logic and that in some aspects it differs from our empathy for real others, there are limits to our empathy for fictional characters. There is also a lack of evidence for a strong link between literary empathy and direct pro-social behaviour. Thus we should be sceptical, or at least more cautious, about the ethics of literary empathy.

FABRICE PICON

## Envisager Todorov: Poétique, éthique et humanisme contemporain

Dans la tradition littéraire française, Tzvetan Todorov est surtout célèbre pour avoir introduit en France, dans le milieu des années soixante, ces fameux formalistes russes qui allaient tant changer le paysage littéraire français, plus précisément celui de la théorie. Ce n'est pas un hasard s'il a d'abord contribué à la littérature française par le legs d'une différence, d'une distance faite proximité. Lui-même, bulgare de naissance, immigré puis naturalisé français, a fait l'expérience de l'altérité dans sa vie et dans sa profession. Expérience marquante et marquée, altérité écrite: la différence est au centre de la réflexion de Todorov d'une autre manière depuis les années quatre-vingt, depuis le temps justement où il s'est éloigné de la discipline qu'il a aidé à constituer – le «structuralisme» – et qu'il s'est appuyé sur le savoir scientifique de ces années où il travaillait la poétique pour se pencher sur des questions d'ordre éthique et moral, mais encore historique et, peut-être avant tout, littéraire.

Ce tournant correspond à une rencontre de mots et à l'influence sur Todorov d'un penseur étranger inclassable: Mikhaïl Bakhtine. On retrouve dans le terme d'«exotopie» – terme français qu'a choisi Todorov dans la traduction qu'il a faite de Bakhtine – et dans celui de «dialogue» l'un des pivots de la pensée de Todorov. Il faut entendre «pivot» de deux manières: d'une part, l'exotopie et le dialogisme représentent un changement dans la façon dont Todorov envisage ses objets d'études vis-à-vis de ses travaux passés (pivot historique qui se situe au début des années quatre-vingt); d'autre part, l'exotopie et le dialogue deviennent, à partir de cette période, le sujet et la méthode plus ou moins explicites de ses œuvres (pivot thématique et méthodologique). Voici ce qu'écrit Bakhtine sur l'exotopie:

Le moment initial de mon activité esthétique consiste à m'identifier à l'autre: je dois éprouver – voir et savoir – ce qu'il éprouve, me mettre à sa place, coïncider avec lui [...] et, en tout état de cause, après s'être identifié à autrui, il faut opérer un retour en soi-même, regagner sa propre place hors de celui qui souffre, et c'est là seulement que le matériau recueilli à la faveur de l'identification pourra être pensé aux plans éthique, cognitif ou esthétique.<sup>1</sup>

Cette «exotopie positive» (l'expression est de Todorov) qui fait suite à l'empathie (coïncider avec l'autre) est donc une «activité esthétique», une méthode littéraire qui permet une approche radicalement différente de celle que

<sup>58</sup> Susan Feagin, "The Pleasures of Tragedy", p. 190.

<sup>1</sup> Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Esthétique de la création verbale*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984, pp. 46–47.