EMPATHY IN LITERATURE

Eileen John

Literature is a form of art, using the medium of language. The experience of its medium is essential to the understanding and appreciation of a given literary work. This basic conception of literature allows for both fictional and non-fictional literary works; the literary kinds associated with fiction—the novel, short story, drama, and much poetry—raise issues of particular interest in relation to empathy, so fiction will be the focus here. Literary works do not lend themselves easily to generalization, but one thing they do fairly universally is use the resources of language to offer and portray possibilities of experience. Literary works typically explore what can be undergone, done, sensed, felt, and thought by conscious beings. These possibilities can be grasped as belonging to an author, a narrating agent, and to explicitly depicted persons or fictional characters. A literary work can thus produce a complex layering or interrelation of experiential perspectives (see Feagin 1996 on readers’ mental “shifts and slides”: 59–82; Robinson 2005: 175–88; Goldie 2012: 30). Readers can give uptake to, and link and compare, diverse perspectives in the course of a single work. In the very broad sense of offering experiential shifts issuing from perspectives other than one’s own, literature seems to be rather pervasively in the empathy business.

Literature might not seem to be too distinctive in this regard, since art in general can be viewed as a domain of perspective-shifting experience. Though not attempting to make a uniqueness claim, I would still offer literature, both the writing and the reading of it, as a rather extreme manifestation of a human urge to know how lives feel, how minds work, and what a full awareness of interacting agents with distinct subjectivities would amount to (Zunshine 2006). This urge can be pursued in literature through the finely conceptualizing, specifying, ordering, relating, and expressive powers of language. Erich Auerbach says of Homer,

> With the utmost fullness, with an orderliness which even passion does not disturb, Homer’s personages vent their inmost hearts in speech; what they do not say to others, they speak in their own minds […] no speech is so filled with anger or scorn that the particles which express logical and grammatical connections are lacking or out of place.

*(Auerbach 1953: 6)*

Dorrit Cohn notes the perhaps paradoxical reality-effect of fiction that gives us an intimacy with others’ inner lives that we do not have with real others: “the special life-likeness of
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narrative fiction – as compared to dramatic and cinematic fictions – depends on what writers and readers know least in life: how another mind thinks, another body feels” (Cohn 1978: 5–6). These remarks about what seems to be the impossibly perspicuous and accessible rendering of experience in literature raise some issues I will return to. For now I hope they suggest the interest of thinking about empathy in relation to literature.

Reading requires being open at least to the experiential shift involved in letting a stretch of language generated by another occupy one’s consciousness. The “occupation” can be intimate, the words closely guiding what is present in a reader’s thinking. Some things we read do not aim to trigger processes of connected thought (grocery lists, credit card bills), but literary works engaged with the possibilities of experience are likely to support uptake of processes of perception, thought, and feeling. While this uptake can be said to be empathetic in a very broad sense – the reader’s perspective shifts to follow a process of thought that is not of her own making – this would not suffice for empathy as that term is most commonly used.

The narrower conception of empathy that I will focus on is that in empathizing one responds to another conscious being and experiences the response as governed by and to some degree replicating how that other experiences his or her (or its) situation. In empathizing, my sense of another’s situation and of his or her concerns in that situation sets the terms for my experiential perspective. Empathy is sometimes described as “feeling with” another, feeling what she feels on the basis of getting inside what she experiences as salient and significant. For various reasons, I will de-emphasize the “success” requirement, namely, the idea that empathetic experience successfully replicates the experience of the “target” (Gibson 2016: 243–4). In empathetic encounters with people, maybe we commonly replicate what the other feels to some extent, but what is more basic is that the empathizer understands the experience in this way, as an activity or state in which another’s perspective is at work within one’s own experience. We take ourselves to be responding as the other has to her own situation – we feel moved in a way that we experience as making sense from that other’s perspective. Eva Dadlez, speaking of empathy with fictional characters, says “the construal is made on behalf of the character” (Dadlez 1997: 183). We sometimes may get evidence suggesting the construal did or did not match the other’s experience, but proving the success is elusive (Matravers 2011: 27; McFee 2011). Especially in the literary case, what matters is that we take ourselves to be achieving empathetic alignment and understanding. We find our thoughts and feelings being guided by another’s situation and concerns (alignment), and we take this to be informative about their experience (understanding). In the literary context, we often frame the empathetic experience differently than the target would or could frame it, and that framing will interfere with the possibility of purely successful matching. In any case, empathy has the meaning within the empathizer’s experience of manifesting the other’s perspective and experience.

If empathy requires taking oneself to respond as another has to her lived situation, a reader of fiction would rarely be in a position to empathize with an author. Fictional works will usually not serve to inform and guide readers as to what authors have undergone. Of course the language that an author selects somehow manifests the author’s experiential perspective. But the trace of authorial experience that shows up on the page is likely to be too indirect and obscure for a reader to follow, and there is not a convention of fiction-reading that readers should try to follow such traces back toward empathy with an author. Readers are very unlikely to think that they have informative access to an author’s experience, despite their close contact with what an author has done in writing the work. This highlights another basic assumption about empathy, namely, that the empathizer is aware of the empathetic experience as such. If I empathize with Donald, the connection with Donald is transparent to me. But the fiction reader’s focus is usually the work itself and its representational content, rather than authorial experience. In the case
of a memoir, in contrast, focus on the author’s experiential perspective can be encouraged and could prompt empathy with the author.

Empathy for fictional characters

Discussions of literature and empathy typically focus on the possibility, mechanisms, and value of empathizing with fictional characters. I will consider these issues in turn, but will start by sketching a few examples. These can be offered as examples only in a suggestive spirit, since empathy is specific to individual reading experiences. The fine variations in response to fiction also do not make it easy to interpret responses as empathetic. I hope these relatively brief and simple passages nonetheless provide a more concrete sense of what can be talked about under this heading.

Toward the middle of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, there is a scene in which Humbert Humbert leaves Dolores playing tennis with another girl for a few minutes. He returns with cold drinks, “and then a sudden void within my chest made me stop as I saw that the tennis court was deserted” (Nabokov 1991: 163). During Humbert’s obsessively isolating travels with the child Dolores, there are numerous incidents like this, in which she appears to have a chance of escaping. At some level, I expect that every reader wants Dolores to escape. However, I also expect that readers have many empathetic experiences aligned with Humbert. A reader, not in any sense “on board” with his project of control and sexual exploitation of Dolores, still seems likely to register the deserted tennis court with a hint of Humbert’s alarm and sense of emptiness. *Lolita* sets up a kind of worst-case scenario for achieving this kind of alignment – with a linguistically over-the-top paedophile as its first-person narrator – and still does it.

Another first-person narrator, in Julio Cortázar’s story “Axolotl,” recounts a detail he observes in the salamander-like axolotls he visits at the aquarium:

> Once in a while a foot would barely move, I saw the diminutive toes poise mildly on the moss. It’s that we don’t enjoy moving a lot, and the tank is so cramped – we barely move in any direction and we’re hitting one of the others with our tail or our head – difficulties arise, fights, tiredness. The time feels like it’s less if we stay quietly.  

*(Cortázar 1967: 5)*

That first observational sentence is able, I think, to offer a brief empathetic moment in a reader’s experience with a generally very puzzling narrator. The careful description of the movement, zeroing in on the small foot and its even smaller toes (and following much description of static axolotls), lets the reader feel the narrator’s deepening absorption and even excitement at this sign of life and perhaps intention. The empathetic moment is broken abruptly by the next sentence, which leaps past the narrator’s eventual transformation into an axolotl, and proceeds matter-of-factly as if answering a casual question about why axolotls do what they do. The last sentence might shift a reader back toward something more like empathy, now with the narrator-as-axolotl, as it notes the unelaborated but somehow crushing impact of time.

Gish Jen’s story “Duncan in China” centers on Chinese-American Duncan who has come to China to teach English in the early 1980s. He has a shaming, uncomfortable meeting with a cousin and the cousin’s young son. They scrabble out a marginal living, Duncan finds them coarse and repellent, and they throw Duncan’s unthinking good fortune into relief. Afterward, Duncan talks to his Chinese boss:
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“I’m going to adopt that child,” announced Duncan, though in fact he had not decided what to do. In fact, he wasn’t even sure a single man could legally adopt a child [. . .]. Still, it was what he wished to do. Or, more accurately: He wished to be the sort of person who would adopt a child like Bing Bing. [. . .] But was he that person? And if he was, why did he feel as though he needed to lie down and sleep for a long, long time?

(Jen 1999: 87)

A reader might take up various perspectives on Duncan’s progress from bold statement of noble intention to yearning for the oblivion of sleep, perhaps seeing through him as an ethical poseur, and also sympathizing with him in his ethically uncomfortable situation. But I think some empathetic “downward momentum” can also lead a reader through this passage, if one feels the steady deflation of his ethical confidence and the desire to hide from his own weakness.

Let me sum up what leads me to offer these cases as examples. As a reader I experienced my responses to them as manifesting, and making evaluative and affective sense from, the position of a given character. That Dolores is not there, that an axolotl moved its toes, or that Duncan’s ethical ambition dissipates, and that these circumstances should feel alarming, absorbing, or deflating, are packages of attention, assessment, and affect that seem best described by saying the reader takes up and is moved by the cognitive-perceptual state and concerns of a character. In these cases other perspectives are likely to operate in a reader’s experience as well, but I think something important about the reading experience would be missing if that alignment with the character’s perspective, and the felt grip of it that I experienced, were discounted. An alternate description of what the reader does – namely, “in-his-shoes” imagining, imagining what I would think and feel if I were in the character’s position – seems inaccurate certainly with respect to Humbert and the narrator on the way to becoming an axolotl. I simply would not be moved as they are moved, and what I do feel as a reader makes sense to me as hanging on these characters’ tendencies and concerns. Perhaps the Duncan case is more susceptible to an “in-his-shoes” response, as most adult readers could imagine themselves along an ethically deflating path like Duncan’s; my inclination is to add such a perspective into the mix – I both take up Duncan’s perspective and feel how his situation would pull me in a similar direction.

These examples also illustrate some of the interesting possibilities of empathy in relation to fiction. The positions of Duncan and Humbert are, respectively, ethically unattractive and despicable; we can empathize with them without liking or wanting to be like them, and without endorsing the desires that move them (Currie 1997, 2004, 2010; Dadlez 1997: 190). With the narrator who turns into an axolotl, liking or disliking him is not really the question; the story is not aimed, it seems, at establishing a psychologically comfortable connection between reader and character. Yet even with that narrator, I think the story supports moments of empathy and presses the further question of empathy with the axolotls. A literary work can make the potential, the limits, and strangeness of empathy into themes.

Stepping back from the examples, there are two systematic skeptical questions to be considered. The possibility of empathizing with fictional characters could be challenged as part of the long-standing philosophical debate about the status of attitudes and emotions directed at the merely fictional. There is no person or conscious being to empathize with in the case of a fictional character, so doesn’t that immediately squash the possibility of empathy? I will set aside this baldly metaphysical worry. The fact that a fictional character does not exist as a living being does not, as it turns out, prevent readers from experiencing the shifts of perspective that are the juicy core of empathy. Readers have cognitively and affectively cogent bases for identifying their responses as empathetic, in relation to what a given character is represented as undergoing.
James Harold points out that we can argue effectively and make sense of being wrong about empathetic feelings for characters (Harold 2000: 347–8). However the larger debates about fiction are resolved, we need to acknowledge responses to works of fiction that have the important experiential hallmarks and sense of directedness of empathy. Note that the lack of an actually existing target can be considered a reason for downplaying or dismissing the criterion of “successful” matching of feeling as relevant to empathy and fiction (Feagin 1996: 96; Neill 2006: 256; Knight 2006: 274).

A different kind of possibility objection rests on a claim about what fictional characters are, as opposed to what they are not. On this objection, fictional characters are all too obviously not enough like real people to be empathized with. We engage with them as elements of narrative wholes for which demands of genre, thematic unity, and plot structure permeate our interpretive and appreciative engagement (Feagin 1996: 95–100; Knight 2006: 277–9). The psychological and broadly life-sensitive responses appropriate in relation to a person are not what are called for – or, more weakly, they can inform but not govern response – with respect to characters. Keeping the “external perspective” on characters in view, treating them as the constructs of storytelling that they actually are, makes “empathy with a character” seem a misleading label for response to the textual, conventional, and artistic elements offered by fiction. Deborah Knight argues that we need “a more formalist and narratological account” of understanding and appreciation of fiction, in which psychological notions of empathetic response to characters would be strongly subordinated (Knight 2006: 279). Susan Feagin, meanwhile, acknowledges that the “elicitors” of a reader’s responses typically differ significantly from what the text presents as eliciting a character’s experience, but argues that readers’ responses can nonetheless be empathetic if they meet some distinctive conditions: a reader’s responses can be structurally similar to processes a character is said to undergo, and readers can, through reflection, integrate the person-centered and literary significance of their responses. I can reasonably attribute emotion to a character when that attribution “makes interpretive sense of the fictional work” (Feagin 1996: 98).

On the one hand, the point about the literary context in which we respond to fictional characters seems obvious and important. What we do with fictional characters is influenced by powers of language, narration, convention, and artistic control that have no obvious parallels in psychologically engaging encounters with people. We are not responding to people, and what is at stake in our responses is different – my empathy for a character is not part of an encounter in which I deal well or badly with another person. My empathy seems to be part of a process in which I hope to do a particular kind of justice to the work. (And we should not assume that empathy with characters is inevitably a way of doing justice – if I unstintingly empathize with Humbert, I will not do justice to Lolita.)

On the other hand, empathy for characters seems clearly to mobilize resources for responding to people. The perspectival input offered by a character has, to some extent, the content, organization, and force – the coherence and momentum – of a person’s perspective. I do not see a particularly tidy way of explaining how we integrate the literary-fiction-sensitive and the person-sensitive aspects of empathy for characters. Presumably it occurs in some way distinctively with each work. To return to the “Axolotl” example above, the fact that I empathize with Cortázar’s character on his way to becoming an axolotl clearly emerges from my awareness of the project of the story: to document such a transformation as if it is a somehow possible outcome of devoted attention to captive axolots. Without that wonderful fictional trajectory in mind (as announced in the first paragraph of the story, “Now I am an axolotl”), a sentence telling me that someone saw a movement of salamander toes would be very unlikely to trigger an empathetic response. As a reader I am looking for the initiation of the transformation,
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Empathy is primed to find what could count as a significant entry into the life of the axolotl. That sentence has, I would say, both “person-shaped” and “story-shaped” force. Gregory Currie, discussing an Anne Brontë novel, stresses that the empathy it triggers is “modified by such other reactions as ironic distance” and “awareness of the author’s manipulation of our responses,” and more generally that “reflection on the empathic structure of the work” contributes to understanding the author’s intentions and the work’s structure (Currie 2004: 186–7). A reader’s awareness of narrative role and the interpretive significance of empathy is part of why the “successful matching” condition seems implausible in relation to empathy with characters. The empathetic experience is guided by a “person-perspective plus,” as it were. A work will lead readers to enhance the person-shaped perspective with story-shaped significance and awareness.

Explaining empathetic response to fiction

What are the mechanisms by which literary works prompt empathy with characters? Recalling the Auerbach and Cohn remarks mentioned earlier, it might seem that we have a simple answer at hand. Literary works can put into words what these imagined people perceive, think, feel, and do, thus granting us access to their experiences and enabling us to give uptake to their perspectives. Note that the Nabokov and Cortázar passages report on a physical scene or object that is the focus of the narrator’s perceptual attention, and this seems immediately to enable at least a partial alignment of experience in the reader (Coplan 2004: 141–2). The passage from Jen’s story gives us direct speech on the part of the character, and then a series of assertions and questions that, if not strictly the words that ran through Duncan’s head (they refer to him, for instance, in the third person), appear to record perspicuously what he was thinking. A work of literature can also focus steadily on the thoughts and experiences of a single character, say Dostoyevsky’s Underground Man or the protagonist whose husband has left her in Anita Brookner’s A Misalliance. However, these possibilities for articulation and focus are not especially explanatory, given that they can be in place in a work and yet not prompt empathy. We are introduced to Brookner’s character Blanche Vernon with some sharp attention to her state of mind, including first-person reflection: “I am innocent, she felt like proclaiming on particularly inclement days, and I always was. My husband left me for a young woman with a degree in computer sciences and in whom I can discern not the slightest spark of imagination” (Brookner 1986: 5). This novel does, I would say, build up the possibility of some empathetic connection with this character, but not simply because of its careful attention to her circumstances and feelings; it is too amusing, and the narration and the character somehow hold engagement with her at bay. The resources of fiction for focus and psychological report are relevant to why it has potential for establishing empathy with characters, but they are not explanatorily sufficient.

One might also hold that the “impossibly good” resources of literary fiction for presenting experience in fact work against empathizing (Carroll 2001: 312). Alex Neill, contrasting literary and cinematic fictional characters, argues that the detailed information offered about the thoughts and feelings of literary characters can impede empathy: “the motive for empathizing […] is the desire to understand how things are with them” and “we do not need to empathize with them in order to understand them” (Neill 2006: 255). Although it seems right that empathizing, considered as a standing human capacity, serves a need to understand others, it is not so clear that instances of empathy are motivated by the desire to understand another. Do I want to improve my understanding of the characters I empathize with? Sometimes yes, but sometimes I just find myself empathizing with a character such as Humbert, without experiencing myself as curious or as problematically ignorant. I can empathize with characters I take myself to understand well, and ones for whom there really is not much to know (e.g., the doomed side
character in a murder mystery, the pig hoping a straw house will fend off the wolf). Needing or not needing to understand another does not seem to distinguish the positions of those likely or not likely to empathize. But Neill’s point suggests a related issue, which is whether empathy can be “handed to us on a plate” or whether it requires some kind of independent activity or processing that crosses a gap between self and other. The crucial thing that can be missing in a reader, even when filled with articulate, psychologically revealing detail about a character, is what might be called activation of concern (Giovannelli 2009: 85). That the character finds something to be relevant to her prospects has to be at work in my experience, and whether that happens is not determined by having rich or impoverished understanding of the character. Though I think a work can prepare for and aim to prompt empathy, it is a process that the reader has to complete in some way, and that is not fully under the control of the work.

It need not be under the reader’s control either; it is just that it is in the reader that activation of concern occurs. Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* leads up to a society party given by the title character, and she worries that it is not gelling as a party: “Oh dear, it was going to be a failure; a complete failure, Clarissa felt it in her bones as dear old Lord Lexham stood there apologising for his wife” (Woolf 1925: 254). I empathize with Clarissa Dalloway at this point, but for me it is a good question how this concern is activated. The party is filled with self-important, politically conservative types, it is a celebration of upper-class mores and privilege, and Clarissa herself is fairly hard to warm to. The structure of the novel seems to matter, in the way the party brings narrative threads together, and the novel’s own questioning of the meaning and value of the party is somehow important. As Knight and Feagin might put it, my empathy is entwined with the character’s role and meaning in the novel, not just with the woman hosting the party.

Although this line of thought does not lead to a confident account of the “mechanisms” behind empathy with characters, an approach that seems helpful is Currie’s appeal to the embedding of empathetic experience in “a project with a certain kind of narrative shape” (Currie 2004: 182; Goldie 2002: 195–9). Currie describes this as a “narrative of inquiry” about the one empathized with (Currie 2004: 185); as just suggested, I would not link empathy too tightly to inquiring about the other. However, it sounds plausible that a work, when prompting empathy, provides the means for tracking the character as a sort of protagonist in at least a mini-narrative. For concern to be activated, it seems that seeing where the other has come from and is trying to go, grasping the path the other hopes to be on, would be the relevant basis. That such tracking is available to the reader is again not sufficient for explaining empathy, and might rather prompt a more detached response, as I had to Brookner’s Blanche Vernon, but it is a good candidate for a minimally necessary “mechanism.”

So far I have focused on the reader’s empathy in terms of what it means for the reader: it shows up in her experiential economy as a matter of being moved by the cognitive-perceptual state and concerns of a character. A great deal of discussion focuses on what exactly the reader could be doing, in order to end up in a state that she takes to have that function. It is difficult to survey this territory because the trickiness of theories of engagement with fiction mix and match with diverse accounts of empathy. Generally some kind of imaginative entertainment of fictional content is assumed, but what is that imaginative activity? Is it a matter of simulating, letting one’s own system “run” on the basis of what the work offers, or of assimilating complex information in building up an understanding of a fictional world? Then the nature, frequency, and importance of empathy within the imaginative activity is disputed. You may think that imagining is essential to reading fiction but not to empathy (Walton 1990, 2015), that the reader’s imaginative activity centrally involves simulation, as does empathy (Feagin 1996; Currie 1997, 2004, 2010), that empathy for characters need not involve simulation (Kieran 2003), or that empathy is not that common or important in relation to fictional characters, especially
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because readers and characters are typically in very different informational and evaluative positions (Carroll 1998, 2001, 2011; Goldie 2012: 31–2; Lamarque 2009). The persistent question is to describe what a reader does such that “self-other differentiation” is maintained – the empathizer is aware that another’s perspective is at work (Coplan 2004), while allowing for that perspective indeed to be at work. How can I be me, thinking and feeling as I do, while thinking and feeling on behalf of a character (Goldie 2011)?

As my brief examples above were intended to show, experiences with fiction that merit that description seem relatively ordinary. Alternative, perhaps less puzzling accounts – that I am experiencing what I would think and feel in the other’s position, or that I am just reacting to the character as an observer – do not seem descriptively adequate. Introspection on these experiences is helpful, I think, with respect to identifying their meaning for the empathizer, but not very helpful with respect to identifying underlying psychological processes. It seems possible that different readers reach empathetic experience by different routes, some using input about a character to simulate the character’s experience, and others using it to form and be moved by a gestalt laden with character-based import (Robinson 2005: 128). I do not want to offer an account that is more precise and confident than seems warranted. A broader point that seems relevant is that reading fiction is an activity we seek out partly in order to change our agency and “centeredness” with respect to thought and feeling. There is a relaxation of control, some kind of openness to letting other patterns of attention, conceptualization, and evaluation occupy the experiential foreground. However we ultimately locate “the self” in the psychological processes at work, it seems that empathetic response to characters is one important form of experience enabled by this openness.

The value of empathy in literature

Finally, what is the value of empathy in relation to literature? As a number of theorists point out, empathy is just one amongst a range of responses that need to be acknowledged and understood (Smith 1995; Feagin 1996), and the value of empathetic response may hang on that fact in some way. The sequence, contrast, and comparison of responses may be important to their collective value.

One view emphasizes that empathy and other emotionally charged responses are important to the appreciation of literary works. Jenefer Robinson argues that “emotional responses give us important information about a novel, information that is not available to someone who does not respond emotionally” (Robinson 2005: 133). In Feagin’s terms, appreciating a work of literary fiction is a matter of experiencing its value and that includes “being affectively or emotionally moved” – an appreciator reads “with feeling” (Feagin 1996: 1). Empathy, to the extent that it contributes to an informative and full experience of a work, particularly by helping us to understand characters, thus has value within literary practice. One might say that this makes empathy instrumental in appreciation, helping us to “get the value out of” the work (Feagin 1996: 1), without itself having literary value. However, even if empathetic power and experience are instrumental to appreciation, I think Robinson and Feagin are persuasive in showing that reading with feeling – at least for some works of literature – is not contingently instrumental to appreciation. Responding to the affective potential of some works is the way to appreciate them, and it is then not obvious why the experiences so central to appreciation would not themselves be part of what we value about the work.

Peter Lamarque suggests that emotional responses, including empathy, “tend to be too reader-relative or culture-specific” to “play a central role in literary criticism” (Lamarque 2009: 247). Since I have said that a work cannot ensure empathetic response, and that this depends on the
activation of concern in a given reader, it sounds sensible not to tie the value of a work to its actual effectiveness in prompting empathy. Nonetheless, it seems that we do count empathetic aspirations and achievements as interesting and important with respect to some works (as I do with “Axolotl” and indeed with Lolita). Perhaps we have a flexible critical practice that lets empathy and failure of empathy matter when we can tell how those effects figure into the aims and power of a given work. If we think more loosely about the pleasures of reading, not worrying about literary value, it seems that many readers would count empathetic response as part of the pleasure. It is a response that can bind us to a story, making a character vividly present. That a reader finds a work interesting can be the result of having formed empathetic connections to its characters.

Views about the value of empathy in response to literature often point beyond the practice of reading and literary appreciation. Feagin thinks of literary fiction in part as “equipment for exercising our minds,” helping us to develop “affective flexibility,” expanding our ability to imagine possibilities adequately (Feagin 1996: 248). Murray Smith develops a related view in casting narrative art as a kind of “extended mind” technology that allows us to expand and refine empathetic response (Smith 2011). Lisa Zunshine, although more concerned with fiction as exercising our ability to attribute mental states to others (not necessarily depending on empathetic connection), presses the general claim that we take pleasure in fiction because we experience it as pervasively testing and making us aware of our “mind-reading wellbeing” (Zunshine 2006: 21).

Along with finding value in empathetic response as an extension and flexing of imaginative, affective, and mind-reading capacities, one can value the content and specific processes of empathy afforded by fiction. Currie suggests that empathetic experience with fiction can work against complacent entrenchment in one’s own outlook: “Few of us have an outlook that is undistorted, wholly reliable, and maximally designed to achieve our own flourishing,” and in empathizing we can “try on for size” another outlook (Currie 1997: 73). The relation between emotions and normative judgment is often interestingly at work in empathy, as we may experience emotional alignment with a character caught up in values we do not accept or fully understand, and that awkward position may be illuminating, perhaps enabling critical assessment of the character or of our own value commitments (Dadlez 1997: 187–94). Keith Oatley sees the power of artistic fiction as deriving importantly from the fact that it does not merely engage habitual schemas for emotional response: the empathetic response to a literary character can show we are capable of feeling things “we might not normally admit to ourselves, which we might think belong only to others” (Oatley 2011: 117). Oatley’s point suggests that while we know that “the other is the source” of the empathy – we are aware of self-other differentiation (Oatley 2011: 113) – this does not mean that the empathetic experience is safely cordoned off in its significance for the empathizer. We can have reason to probe the basis for our empathy and to consider what we might know about ourselves on that basis.

The specific empathizing projects that a literary work supports may not be focused on celebrating or strengthening empathy, but may exploit those projects for some further purpose. Tzachi Zamir’s discussion of Shakespeare’s Richard III makes the empathetic response to an evil character one part of an engagement with moral skepticism and its psychological bases, and with the limited reach of philosophical argument. The play involves “dimensions of response that counter empathy and conflict with it” (Zamir 2007: 86). Or, as with “Axolotl,” a work may be about empathy itself, exploring it as an interesting and potentially problematic form of connectedness. Terry Eagleton, reading Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” – in which the figure hearing the nightingale feels “too happy in thine happiness,” until “Now more than ever seems it rich to die” – takes the poem to address “an empathy so intense that it prefigures the
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seductive indifference of death” (Eagleton 2009: 71). Joshua Landy, meanwhile, urges us to resist valorizing fictional empathy as if it is inevitably desirable as a servant of real-world empathy, and as if “there is simply no such thing as too much Mitgefühl” (Landy 2010: 223). Citing Lolita as exemplary for showing that the ideal reader can be “one who continually stands back from her empathy” (Landy 2010: 224), Landy further presents Flaubert’s Madame Bovary as asking readers to cancel out competing empathies and “as a result, to feel, with the hard-bitten, hard-won resignation of the ancient skeptics, the perfect calm of absolutely nothing” (Landy 2010: 229). Empathetic response to fiction can itself be the target of critical scrutiny.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a few basic thoughts. The literary experience of empathy draws on psychological, imaginative, and interpretive capacities we use in relating to people. It is a manifestation of what we do in “attuning to others” (Oatley 2011: 113) and finding them to be real, interesting, and ethically weighty. Empathy can help fictional characters “come to life” and grip us as readers. But the literary context is also quite different, since it eliminates (most of) the practical engagement and decision-making that empathy ordinarily helps us with. This difference is likely to explain, in part, why empathy can roam as freely and surprisingly as it does in the realm of fiction. With a literary work we respond to an artistic construction, and empathy with a character will be framed within that experience. As many of those cited above note, the literary work can also lead to critical reflection on the empathetic response, in a way that is hard to do (and perhaps inappropriate) in responding to a person.

Literature is an art form offering complex experiential shifts and, very broadly construed, possibilities for empathy. I have supported the more narrowly focused view that some responses to fictional characters are empathetic, where this is not just a matter of imagining oneself in another’s shoes. This empathy exemplifies a relaxation of the self’s control of perspective, an openness to “activation” by another’s concerns, that it seems we seek out in fiction. This activation might involve simulation or other mechanisms that allow a character’s perspective to guide a reader’s response. My focus has been on the empathetic meaning of the response, where this reflects the person-shaped perspective of the character and the literary context. Echoing a point made by John Gibson, it seems unhelpful to require successful matching of characters’ feelings. As Gibson suggests, focusing on the process, “the imaginative project of attempting to grasp” another’s perspective (Gibson 2015: 244), is more fruitful for understanding the significance of literary empathy. The empathizing reader is in the process of building a not merely self-oriented sense of the meaningful environment. This experiential openness can benefit the reader as an appreciator of fiction, as well as exercising capacities relevant to attunement to real others.

References

Eileen John