

Finally, Giovanelli believes that an account of sympathy as entailing empathy gains support from the causal connection between empathy and sympathy—namely, that empathy often leads to sympathy. Giovanelli proposes this consideration despite the fact that he realizes that the notion of empathy that he presupposes is compatible with the empathizer being hostile or indifferent to the target.

For example, it is often suggested in the literature that the Complete Sadist should be an astute empathizer—all the better to grock what torments his victim. Likewise, suppose I could engender Hitler's feelings towards Jewish people in my own heart; but that could lead me to anathematize him. Nor is there any contradiction involved in suggesting that I might empathize, in Giovanelli's sense, with the rodeo star's experience but just remain indifferent to his interests and desires because I'm just not an-at-home-on-the-range kinda' guy.

Clearly, if there is a causal connection between empathy à la Giovanelli, and sympathy, it is an empirical question, not a conceptual one. But in order to convince us empirically that there is such a connection, Giovanelli will have to show that empathy must be added to the audience member's endorsement of the character's goals, interests, and desires in order to explain our sympathy for the protagonist. Until Giovanelli can adduce some reasons why identificatory empathy has to be added to accounts of sympathy like the one I've sketched, adding empathy/identification to sympathy seems like so much excess theoretical baggage.

# 12

## Empathy: Interpersonal vs Artistic?

Graham McFee

### 12.1 Introduction

Although I have not typically thought about contact with artworks (and especially with literary works) in terms of empathy,<sup>1</sup> I had an experience which might seem to point in that direction. On one occasion, while suffering from heatstroke, I read at one 'sitting' a translation of De Lampedusa's novel, *The Leopard*. Confined to bed, my attention to the novel took on a peculiar focused quality, in which I 'imaginatively identified' (for want of a better expression) with a central character, throughout his trials and tribulations as recounted in the book. And my 'identification' was quite extreme: for instance, those circumstances made it seem easy to put oneself into the climatic conditions. It seems to me very plausible to see my relation to that central character in terms of *empathy*. But, of course, this case is very much more than just my being one of those 'readers [who] adopt the perspective of one or more characters in fictional narratives' (Coplan (2004): 141). Indeed, it is this stronger (than usual) sense of identification that clearly warrants the term *empathy* here.

Now, a case so peculiar shows us nothing directly about reading, about empathy, or about literature. My reading of *The Leopard* in a semi-hypnoid state cannot be our model of the usual experience of literature. Still, in that unusual case, my empathy was with the character as depicted, not with the author. And this would, I take it, be a characteristic of any such identification—although the situation might become clouded when the writing had a strong autobiographical flavor. But that would just generate the familiar problem of distinguishing the implied author (and his acts) from

<sup>1</sup> Thoughts raised by the 'Empathy' conference at California State University Fullerton, June, 2006 led to this paper. I am conscious that some readers might see this as 'inventing the wheel': my only reply is that most of the other offerings on this topic do not seem appropriately *round* to me. (My avoiding the term 'circular' is important!) And I would like to thank all those who by word or deed encouraged me to shape those thoughts into a chapter; especially, in alphabetical order, Heather Battaly, Amy Coplan, Terry Diffey, Peter Goldie, and Derek Matravers. And then, again, to the editors for help later on.

the author in reality (and his). Thus, in *My Family and Other Animals* (1956), Gerald Durrell writes as if his brother Lawrence lived only a small distance from the rest of the family. Although that does not in fact replicate the living arrangements of the real Durrell clan in Greece, it is the *facts* of the 'world' Gerald describes or creates in that novel. Then, there are facts relevant in my case of reading *The Leopard* beyond those described in the novel (combined perhaps with some facts of a very general kind about Sicily at the time the novel was set), facts I need to be aware of in making sense of it, but which the characters in the novel need never bring to mind. Hence there is no character (and certainly no person) whose state of mind (or some such) I would be 'matching' in being empathetic here.

In what follows, I begin by asking what relevance, if any, such a genuine case of empathetic reading of a novel has for our more general understanding of that grasp of novels achieved through reading them. That leads to a reconsideration of the place of an appeal to *empathy*. And, then, what can we learn from an empathetic reading of a fictional narrative? As such, my primary focus should be on cases relating to literary works, rather than on cases of interpersonal empathy. But, although the cases are quite different, features of the one may be brought out by placing it side-by-side with the other, noticing similarities and differences that strike us as relevant—articulating in this way '*objects of comparison*' (PI § 130<sup>2</sup>) to help us in thinking about aspects of our case we might otherwise have missed, perhaps because of their simplicity and familiarity. At its heart, such a comparison illuminates the sense in which an empathetic response is an achievement (see below).

Perhaps it is unfair to begin characterizing *empathy* in terms of this admittedly extreme case: am I begging the question against a more general account of an empathetic response to literature? There may be cases *weaker* than my example: but are they definitely empathy? Or should we prefer some other explanatory concept? The primary difficulties in replying accurately come from the problem of deciding what one would be *putting aside* if one began to speak regularly of empathetic responses in this context: what did I say before? And, if that was adequate, what could motivate me to *add* to my conceptual repertoire here? Further, do I have only one account of reading fiction? Obviously not. Moreover, does recognizing some (but not others) of the fictions as *literature* make it more or less likely that I will engage with them

<sup>2</sup> Standard abbreviations are used for the works of Wittgenstein:

Wittgenstein, 1953—cited as 'PI' [also 2001—see below].

Wittgenstein, 1969—cited as 'OC'.

Wittgenstein, 1976—cited as 'LFM'.

Wittgenstein, 1993—cited as 'PO'.

Wittgenstein, 2005—cited as 'BT'.

Wittgenstein & Waismann, 2003—cited as 'VoW'.

On *objects of comparison*, see Baker (2004): 48 note 15; 81–2; 128—importantly, comparing A with B is not saying that A is B (nor vice versa).

empathetically? Again, there seems no reason to say 'yes'. So there seems no reason to suppose that, in setting aside *empathy* as an explanatory concept, one automatically leaves out something typically of relevance to the reading of, say, novels. Still, there may yet be cases where *empathy* just seems the right concept.

As often in philosophy (see PI §79), if we understand the situation, we can say what we like: the key thing is what *contrasts* we are respecting. Then, a fairly robust view will be preferable: there should be some reason to talk of *empathy* here. Thus, for example, if the case is happily described without appeal to that idea, we have no reason to invoke it.<sup>3</sup> Here, an emphasis on *empathy* must pick out at least the taking up of another's psychological perspective. Indeed, while there are disputes as to whether an account of *empathy* should stress emotion,<sup>4</sup> this aspect—of perspective-taking—is widely acknowledged. For instance:<sup>5</sup>

Empathy is a process or procedure by which a person centrally imagines the narrative (the thoughts, feelings, and emotions) of another person. (Goldie (2000): 195)

Or:

when I empathize with another, I imaginatively experience his or her emotional states, while simultaneously imaginatively experiencing his or her cognitive states. (Coplan (2004): 144)

Or:

[the term] 'Empathy' is often used... to designate an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience. (Nussbaum (2001): 301–2)

Notice, here, the emphasis on the *experience* of that other person; and on one's taking that experience as *one's own*, if only in imagination. These, at least, seem features which might justify our use of the term 'empathy'.

So, applied to reading literary fictions, it must amount (roughly) to a taking up of the psychological perspective of a character. But exactly what features of my empathizing with a person are supposed to carry over?

<sup>3</sup> Suppose, then, that someone urges that empathy can be used predictively: knowing you are in such-and-such a state, and wanting to know what you will do, I imagine myself in that state, and imagine what I would do. And then you do that. Well, this would clearly be insufficient to justify success in *empathy*—not least because this kind of imagination is as well explained as *sympathy* (see below). But also the mere fact of prediction here is quite compatible with my having failed to genuinely imagine (as from my own perspective) what you were feeling—getting this wrong could still result in successful prediction.

<sup>4</sup> See Coplan (2004) note 15.

<sup>5</sup> Some other accounts of empathy include: Simon Blackburn (2005: 113): 'the state of being emotionally and cognitively "in tune with" another person, particularly by feeling what their situation is like from the inside or what it is like for them'. Robert M. Gordon, in Audi (1999: 261): 'imaginative projection into another person's life, especially for vicarious capture of its emotional and motivational qualities'. Sarah Richmond, in Honderich (2005: 242): 'States of mind in which someone shares the feelings or outlook of another, sometimes prompted by imaginative exercises such as "stepping into another's shoes"'.

## 12.2 Getting the Metaphysics Right?

Before we can come to that topic, we must set some guidelines for our discussion: what constraints can we invoke, such that what we produce will be more plausibly thought philosophy?

For me, at least four points seem key here. First, one must say only as much as is profitable, where the danger is one clearly identified by Wittgenstein: 'to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back' (OC §471). Second, one must be able to say something here without needing to say *everything*: if too many other, general commitments are required, we shall have to defer this topic until they are resolved. (I have in mind, especially, commitments in the philosophy of mind.) Thus, in going forward, we are implicitly conceding that this is not the case. In combination, these two ideas should make us hesitant about introducing yet more theoretical machinery. Certainly, we cannot *assume* that there is some abstract structure, underlying our appreciation of literature, which we might discover by analysis: at best, such a structure would be an abstraction *from* what real practitioners do—as when art students are required to 'make visual images', as though this was the underpinning of their more normal activities of drawing the figure, painting the still-life, and so on. So we cannot just build-in the thought that, say, all novels (or even most) *require* empathetic reading. In this way, our account here should roughly mirror the pre-theoretical or 'everyday' one. Then, third, if one thinks in terms of rescuing our understanding from the excesses of philosophical invention, or of 'bringing back' from metaphysical uses (see PI §109), the 'everyday' is just the default position, *not* some specific thesis. So we should not begin from some rich or ripe metaphysical world: at least, I will not be beginning there.

The fourth point involves recognizing the connection of *this* interest in literary art with other interests in it, and other theorizations of it. For, in so far as this is an inquiry in philosophical aesthetics, it will draw on a grasp, however tenuous, of the nature and contribution of literary works, especially novels. It helps to sketch a plausible one. Then, the rough thought might take works of literature to 'have cognitive benefits, [so] that we can learn... from them, that we can be improved by them' (Lamarque (2001): 456), where this might be cashed out in terms of 'an artist's way of "looking at the world"' (Iris Murdoch, quoted in Lamarque (2001): 456<sup>6</sup>). This is partly a matter of recognizing how one moves from, say, seeing Proust's *world* to seeing the world as Proust does—where this second, too, is only an invitation to 'try out'. Thus we might begin with the general idea of literature as *revealing*:<sup>7</sup> that, for example, the typical novel 'instructs us in how to view the world' (Lamarque (1996): 105). Then the empathetic

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Murdoch (1998: 326): 'study of literature... is an education in how to picture and understand human situations'. Or again: 'what we learn... is something about the real quality of human vision, when it is envisaged, in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life' (Murdoch (1998): 353).

<sup>7</sup> Compare Wisdom (1953: 224) for the thought that art can reveal anew the familiar from life, exemplified by discussion of some novels.

reading might offer the possibility of viewing the world from the perspective of some character or other. And we might take some novels as so structured either to permit or to require such a reading. (Of course, by our earlier point, they may be few-and-far-between.)

Clearly, this is the beginnings of an account of *some* of what is involved in reading *some* novels on *some* occasions, partly explaining the insight we feel these novels offer us. Were it not, it would be very odd to appeal to *empathy* here at all: and yet people (and critics<sup>8</sup>) regularly do just that, directly and indirectly, when commenting on novels. However, this might—and typically will—fall far short of my empathetic engagement with *The Leopard*, described above, even though that case would be included within the broad remit. Here, though, the instruction on how to *see* the world (as constituted by such-and-such novel: see above) includes, of course, aspects of how to *feel* in that world, and what to feel in response to it.

Still, seeing a concern with empathy in this light may already cast some shadows across it. For instance, Nick Hornby characterizes his fictionalized autobiography, *Fever Pitch* (1992: 11<sup>9</sup>), as 'an attempt to gain some kind of angle on my obsession', and explains that the text is 'for anyone who has wondered what it might be like to be that way' (12). The implication of such an appeal (I take it) is that I can, for example, learn *what it is like* to be a soccer fan through reading Hornby's book; and that, somehow, I do this by empathizing with the book's narrator. So I take for granted that some kind of appeal to *empathy* is indeed warranted in respect of one's understanding of *some* novels on *some* occasions—but that concession is a place-holder. For what does empathy *amount to* in that context? In particular, we cannot assume that what we know of empathy in respect of fellow humans and *their* situations (in so far as we know *anything*) simply carries over to this account of the art case. Although I have no complete argument to show that it does not, what follows presents some considerations in that direction, focusing especially on the requirement that, in empathy, my psychological states *match* yours (see below). But, given my account of artistic judgment (McFee (2005), and see below), we should certainly expect the two cases of empathy to differ in important ways. Also, the general problems of ascribing psychological states to artworks—especially to the physical-object kinds—point in the same direction.<sup>10</sup> So I will take as the default position here that the concept *empathy* will operate differently in the art case, when contrasted with the inter-personal case.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> One instance: John Gardner (1978: 112) writes of 'the queer experience of falling through the print on the page into something like a dream, an imaginary world', in order to make concrete his claim that '[o]ne of the essentials of our humanness . . . is that we empathize' (112).

<sup>9</sup> My thanks to Murray Smith whose mention of this book at the 'Empathy' conference reminded me of it; and also for his discussion of related themes with me. [It is very important to distinguish the content of the book—about 'football' = soccer—from that of the feature film, about baseball!]

<sup>10</sup> For a convenient summary of such problems for cognitivist account of the emotions and their application in philosophical aesthetics, see Kivy (2002): 25–6; 110–34.

<sup>11</sup> That default position certainly seemed granted by presentations at the 'Empathy' conference, even those more sympathetic that I am to some role for empathy here.

## 12.3 What Might We Learn from Thinking About Interpersonal Empathy?

Still, it may be helpful to address the interpersonal case, since it offers uncontentious examples of *empathy* with others.<sup>12</sup> Here *empathy* must require more than just, say, getting a sense of what another felt from, for instance, his expression or demeanor—that is just our ordinary understanding of another person, with no need for a special name or process.

So let us begin by noting that *empathy* is regularly and rightly contrasted with *sympathy*: for example, Peter Goldie (2000: 176) writes of 'a tendency to confuse sympathy with empathy'. Thus, I am sympathetic to the famine victim, but I certainly do not try to feel what he or she feels. And we regularly regard efforts to do just that, when we find them, as unusual, if not excessive (as with Simone Weil's restricting her diet to that of her war-time compatriots, even though she could have eaten more). So in broad brush-strokes—especially as our interest here is not in this case—*roughly*, in sympathy I do not *share* your '*mental state*'.<sup>13</sup> the implication is that, in empathy, I do share your '*mental state*'. And 'definitions' characteristically offered reflect this idea: for example, that from Goldie (2000: 195, quoted above<sup>14</sup>). Again, this highlights why merely imagining what it would be like to experience what another is experiencing is not yet a helpful characterization of *empathy*: it does not yet make the connection to my responses being emotional or affective ones (too).

Two related points can be extracted from this fact that, in empathy, we imaginatively put ourselves in the other's position, while still recognizing our individuality.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, a fuller treatment might find revealing *objects of comparison* in one's responses to, say, biographies or autobiographies. Given that the interpersonal case *seems* at first the simplest, and that the evocative writing in novels has a stronger claim on our *emotional* responses than such cases (as well as being my chief interest), those are the examples from which I begin, and then use throughout. And, of course, my emphasis on the case of literature is of a piece with my commitment to the distinctive character of appreciation of the arts (see McFee (2005)).

<sup>13</sup> The idea of a '*mental state*' was one which generally Wittgenstein preferred to resist: see, for instance, PI §149. See also VoW: 5 on: 'so-called mental states'. In particular, Wittgenstein had reservations about taking any form of *understanding* to be a mental state. A key feature here is temporal location: as Wittgenstein imagines being asked there: '*When* did you know how to play chess? All the time? or just when you were making a move? And the whole of chess during each move?' Then he comments ironically: 'How queer that knowing how to play chess should take such as short time, and the game so much longer!' (PI §50 note). [The remark is from BT §36 (p. 114).] See also his remark about what *time* there was a change in the price of shares on the stock market, if the Exchange opened at the new price (PO: 405; MS, 119): 'If the price of a commodity has changed between yesterday and today, when did it change? How much was it at midnight, when nobody was buying?'

<sup>14</sup> Compare also Smith (1995): 87: 'In sympathizing with the protagonist I do not simulate or mimic her occurrent mental state.' The implication, then, is that in empathy I do so simulate or mimic. See also Feagin (1996): 95: 'Empathy with another person requires that one "share" another's feelings, that one "feel" things as that person does or did.' (I assume the scare-quotes pick out the 'in imagination' condition.) Also consider Feagin (1996): 114: 'Empathy involves simulating the mental activity and processes of the person with whom one empathizes'. (Compare note 26.)

First, and negatively, it suggests limits to empathy; second, and positively, it offers a strategy for conceptualizing complete or perfect empathy.

Let us take them in that order. So, what constrains such a process of imaginatively entering the other's emotional world? Stephen Pinker<sup>15</sup> offers a slogan that might have a wide scope:

The body is the ultimate barrier to empathy. Your toothache simply does not hurt me the way it hurts you.

Pinker might seem to be arguing simply that my pain cannot be *numerically identical* with yours: but there is no *numerical* identity condition here—also we cannot easily see what a 'qualitative identity' would be like. In fact, Pinker's insight concerns the power of the connection between my psychological states and my anatomy and physiology. For key limitations will flow from my distinctive central nervous system—but also from other, similar differences between us: in particular, differences of gender, and of range of experiences. In effect, what I can *imagine* sets a kind of limit here—for empathy between us, my imagined version of your psychological state must agree with your *actual* state (to some degree) or I have failed to empathize with you. And this is what is meant here by my psychological states *matching* yours.

Thus, suppose I read in a newspaper about a South American woman who has been involved with drug-running. The article includes a striking photograph. I become fascinated with this character (perhaps the striking image is important here), and try to find out more. Perhaps, then, I go to her trial—and I try to find myself in her shoes, to *empathize* with her. We can readily highlight some blocks to, or limitations of, empathy here. For instance (a version of Pinker's point?), our difference of gender might mean that I could not readily imagine the connections of responses to anatomy and physiology. In effect, this might limit *my* (current) capacity to imaginatively entertain her position. But there are also limitations on the degree to which I can imaginatively enter her world: it is South America (I've never been); it is a world of vicious killers, and so on. In short, it is nothing like my world.

Does this suggest that I can only empathize with those like me? Certainly, some practical limitations here will be set by the scope of what, at present, I can realistically imagine, as opposed to merely guessing. For one cannot be empathetic unless (or to the degree that) one is successful in 'matching' the other's psychological states. Then here too what *I* can imagine may set boundaries to what I can make sense of, given that some of my concepts may depend on my having the anatomy and physiology I do. So Pinker's constraint also applies when we ask about *getting it right!* For, in practice, we will be similarly limited, through our imagination as at present, in the extent to which we can successfully 'match' the psychological state of someone at some remove

<sup>15</sup> From his *How The Mind Works* (1997), quoted in Brockman (2006): 146.

from us. And my emphasis here on *matching* is to avoid getting bogged down in the detail of how this might be achieved.

Then, as the second crucial point noted above, this 'constraint' could be read positively, as elaborating the key success condition. Thus, with a real woman, it seems at first sight that we know what *would be* required for empathy in the highest degree: namely, that I should imaginatively enter her world so that my emotional state is the same as hers, although of course mine is only taken on 'in imagination'. So we have a rough model for empathetic engagement with another person to the highest degree: namely, that my mental state should 'match' hers (completely), putting aside the 'in imagination' qualification.<sup>16</sup> Of course, we do not expect to get such 'total empathy' in any real case: it functions here as an idealization. But to talk of empathy at all is to approach that ideal, to some extent: to grant a *role* to that ideal. And, at every turn, that is to conceive of my psychological states matching the others': or that I '*centrally imagine*... the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of another person' (Goldie (2000): 195); that I might 'imaginatively experience his or her emotional states, while simultaneously imaginatively experiencing his or her cognitive states' (Coplan (2004): 144); or have 'an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience' (Nussbaum (2001): 302). For all of *these* can be cashed out as such matching, since each takes empathy to involve my imaginative engagement with what the *other* is feeling. And other versions worthy of the term 'empathy' (say, in contrast to *sympathy*) must grant the same point. Then the degree to which I achieve empathy in any actual case will be the degree to which there is such matching.

In this way the metaphor of *matching* seems fundamental to any detailed account of empathy here. For genuine empathy occurs only with matching of this sort. So empathy is, in this way, *relational* in a stronger sense than, say, even sympathy. My sympathy with you (or for you) does not require that you feel anything: but at the centre of the idea of empathy is precisely a *sharing* of some psychological state or condition. So both your contribution and mine are required. And clearly it will not be sufficient for *empathy* that, say, you are afraid and so am I. Rather, in empathy, I am seeking to enter into your emotional state, if only in imagination: in this sense, success in empathy requires that my emotional state *match* yours. Of course, it seems that such matching can be *to some specific degree* or other, including totally. Further, we might expect to investigate to *which* degree. If this were right, the same should be true of empathy. So, to repeat, empathy can be *to some degree* since my emotional state may match yours *to some degree*. This thought too will be fundamental to an elaboration of the concept of empathy, reflecting how such empathy is regarded: that it can be to some degree or other. And the *matching* model offers an account of that fact. Yet nothing here says how to make out that matching; hence, it offers no guidance as to how *empathy* is to be elucidated.

<sup>16</sup> My thought here is that including the 'in imagination' requirement will make it more *difficult* to cash out this 'matching' metaphor: so putting it aside is a way to support the advocates of empathy-theory.

On such a picture, empathy *appears* like an achievement, even if only achieved to some degree. An elaboration may forestall any misunderstanding at this point. For this view is not the extreme one that only 'total empathy' counts. Rather, it is about the usefulness of the empathy model: I am urging that such a model has a degree of matching as its success condition; and that, without some such condition, it would not be attractive to us, especially in aesthetics. For the idea is precisely that I might *succeed* in imaginatively entering the other's world: hence that I 'take on' psychological states of *hers*.

So, to repeat, empathy *appears* like an achievement, on such a picture. For, in this context, my having empathy for you involves my adopting some aspects from your psychological state (such as affective tone or perspective). As we said, the success condition here can be thought a kind of 'matching'. Then what of cases where I do not in fact 'match' your mental state at all (in the relevant respect)? Is this *failed* empathy, or not empathy? However that (terminological?) debate is resolved, at the least we can grant that—despite my best efforts at empathetic engagement—things may not go well. Thus we must recognize cases where, for whatever reason, the upshot of my fellow-feeling for the person in the plight is, from my side, empathy—that is, I intend it to be empathy and I take it for empathy: I take myself to be 'matching' the emotional state of that person in the relevant way. But, in the event, I fail: my mental states do not, after all, 'match' those of the person with whom I took myself to be empathetically engaged. (Since we have empathy only when we 'match', there must clearly be cases like this—of *intended* empathy, perhaps—where empathy fails despite my best efforts.)

Of course, there are, no doubt, also failures of empathy which amount to my simply making nothing of your situation. But these are not the cases under consideration. Rather, in the cases before us, I do *something*. So, in such cases, failing to empathize is not, of course, like failing to see or failing to notice. When I fail to *see*, or fail to *notice*, the step—or the sheep—there may be nothing that I in fact *do*: I merely do not attain *those* achievements. By contrast, in the favored cases considered, the failure to empathize is, in effect, the failure of match between (to put it tendentiously) my psychological states and those of another. So we can see this as my *striving* for empathy: my projecting what I hope will be empathetic—in failure to empathize, there is simply no 'match' between my psychological state and that of the person with whom I am trying to empathize. Then this is what, earlier, I called 'intended empathy'. But, again, this is not really empathy at all.

This sense of empathy as an *achievement*—that one only has (genuine) empathy when one's emotional states *match* those of the empathized-with—is central to the standard views of empathy, as represented in those accounts quoted/cited above. If empathy is, in this sense, an *achievement*, we must be very clear when it *is* and—especially—when it is *not* achieved: we should look, as it were, to its *failure conditions*. For, if conceptual

importance is to be urged for *empathy* (with some 'work' asked of it<sup>17</sup>), it must at least make sense to say that there is or is not empathy: hence that there is or is not such matching. And, as above, talk of 'matching' here will be both *to some degree* (we do not require total matching) and *in respect of...* whatever psychological states are at issue (rather than across the board). One question will be whether we can, in some way, make the common sense account of empathy more robust. So, below, I will consider two or three attempts to do just that, either by treating the matching as quantifiable or by modeling it as a comparison of brain states. Neither of these seems promising. But they represent efforts to give a more explicit 'cash-value' to talk of *empathy*. Then we will be better placed to evaluate the more general usefulness of the concept *empathy*: in particular, its usefulness in philosophical aesthetics. And this paper is shaped by such an investigation.

Let us return to success in empathy. Then my empathizing with you, say in respect of your fear on hearing a noise in the night, leaves me with at least *something like* a feeling of the fears you experience: my psychological state matches yours. So far, this is harmless. If you grant that I have understood you, and I claim empathy (in this respect), perhaps 'accompanying' my comments with 'suitable' behavior, there seems no reason to deny that my psychological state matched yours. And perhaps our interest is exhausted by my claim to empathy and your granting of it. So, to elaborate, this is a case accepted as empathy but with no *explicit* matching of my psychological states with yours. There might be nothing more to say. (One might still wonder why I insist on the term '*empathy*'). But this is, so far, not a very helpful way to explore my empathetic engagement with you. For example, why is this *empathy* and not, say, sympathy? I am not denying that it is: yet why? My assertion of empathy here seems sufficient for some purposes, but scarcely if someone raises a serious objection to that claim.

If my claim were challenged, or you not around (or not inclined) to comment, there would be no strategy for elaborating such a claim; for making it more robust—in short, for *proving* it. We cannot check the matching independently; say, by comparing my psychological states with yours. And such a challenge might reasonably arise. We have already conceded that (merely) *intending* empathy is not enough. In particular, we may need more robust claims to empathy precisely when more turns on its being, or not being, genuine *empathy*—say, in contrast to *sympathy* ('Yes, you do feel for us—but you don't know what it is like for us'). And the hope to use the concept of empathy productively within philosophical aesthetics assumes of it just this kind of robustness:

<sup>17</sup> Of course, if empathy were really just a humanistic (or 'folk-psychological') notion, and if one had no particular designs on utilizing the concept of empathy in an explanatory way, one might rest content with a humanistic account here—that I am good at seeing the world through your eyes and feeling it through your 'shoes' just to the degree that I am: to the degree, perhaps, that I know you well, and hence understand what you are thinking and feeling. That is to say, having assumed that there was no 'logical bar' (Dilman (1975): 211) to knowing the thoughts and feelings of another, the account would draw on such knowledge as we find it in our everyday lives. But a concept such as this will not sustain the kinds of precise distinctions (say, from sympathy) which must be deployed by anyone pressing the distinctive claims of empathy, for instance in philosophical aesthetics.

without that, there will be no real reason to prefer the term 'empathy' to others, such as 'sympathy', when considering emotional and identificatory readings of (in our case) novels. As above, our strategy is to ask with what *empathy* is being contrasted. When, as with the contrast with sympathy, we recognize what empathy here is *not*, we can see how its claims might be defeated. But that does not help elucidate our understanding of *success* in empathy. Hence this loose sense of 'matching' cannot be elaborated into a theoretical structure for use in philosophical aesthetics.

But might more be made of the concept of empathy? Well, genuine empathy, as opposed to (mere) intended empathy, requires what I have called 'the matching of psychological states' that is built into even those accounts where it is not mentioned explicitly. And, thus far, the problems for matching may *seem* to concern our knowing, or being sure, of the empathy: an epistemological problem. Once we move beyond the simple case, where the claim to empathy is not contested, is there a way forward? As we will see, my response illustrates why, in fact, the original difficulty is not centrally epistemological at all.

One feature of my previous discussion might seem to offer hope to the theorist of empathy. Above, in looking towards the 'matching' central to empathy, I spoke of the match as 'to some degree'. This might seem to suggest that one's account here could be made more robust: that the 'degree' could be specified, at least in principle. For, without some such stronger version, talk of 'to some degree' may seem contentless. (We will return to that idea below.) Yet this is not my point. Instead my thought was to recognize it as 'to some degree' by specifying where, and how, it failed. For instance, we might offer an explanation of my failure to empathize with a Victorian woman as a failure to 'match'—say, I could not really see the world *as a woman* might, although managing to empathize with the Victorian character of the other (or vice versa). So saying that the match was 'to some degree' is justified by pointing out its failures: that is all there is to the thought of partial failure or success here. This sense of 'match' would be unexceptionable. Yet, equally, this sense of 'matching' could not sustain any further elaboration. In fact, at this level we do not pursue the idea of *having* matched, but only the cases of intended empathy through having *failed* to match—by elaborating where exactly this failure occurred. There is no *precision* to be had here beyond this.

This might suggest a stronger version: that one should make this 'degree' of match more explicit, thereby producing a more robust version of the 'matching' criterion. Yet there is no *quantifiable level* of failure here—it was not, say, a case of '70% success'; and could not be, because there is no finite totality of (relevant) aspects to match or not match. And the requirement here should, for me, both be within the powers of humans in a reasonable timescale and be the sorts of things we can come to by steps: *complete-minus-two*, *complete-minus-one*, and then *complete*. This is to import a certain conception of finite totalities<sup>18</sup> as involved in the claim to *all* or to *completeness*. Lacking

<sup>18</sup> The strictly mathematical model here is misleading; and this is part of my point. As Wittgenstein recognized, someone asked how many numerals she had learned to write down might reply, 'Aleph-null'

such a finite totality, the idea of a *complete match* makes no sense. (Rather, there is no 'complete'!) Then since, in principle, it makes no sense to talk of a 100% match, it is equally senseless to assay other numerical results. This means that a strategy of this kind, which seeks to quantify the degree of *matching*, is misconceived. Hence it seems unpromising to attempt to make more precise the degree of empathy by making the *degree* of matching more exact. But, as we have seen, the *question* of matching here is crucial: as traditional accounts agree, with no 'match', there can be no empathy, since your psychological states do not relevantly resemble mine—it is *intended* empathy only!

Yet perhaps we can explain the problem so as to suggest a way forward. For if this whole idea of 'matching' *seems* problematic, isn't that 'only because of our too slight acquaintance with what goes on in the brain and central nervous system' (PI §158)? Isn't that the 'matching' to which we should really aspire? Again, that thought, although misguided, tells us something important. For it might seem that, if the issue concerned our brain states only, mine might match with yours to such-and-such an extent—on the occasion, all of your c-fibers are firing, but only 70% of mine (and so on). That might reinstate the matching metaphor.

In fact, the difficulty is more profound. For resolving the question of *success* in empathy cannot wait until empathizer and empathizee are in some scanner (or, worse, on a post-mortem table): we should in principle be able to determine successes and failures 'at the human level', at least as reliably as we can where the psychological states of others are at issue. After all, the 'matching' here is done by humans. Given that we cannot readily explain functional equivalence here *divorced* from similarities of causal structure, this would seem to set one limit, by constraining my empathy to (at best) creatures whose physical structures resembled mine sufficiently closely. Yet it cannot really be a case of my *brain states* matching yours, unless we first import what is at issue; namely, that parallels at the level of achievement must *always*, or at least typically, depend on parallels in the causal substrate.<sup>19</sup> And, again, that is an assumption we must criticize.

As an extreme example, suppose some research identifies a pattern of brain activity it regards as constituting the loving response to an image of a beloved—what should we make of, say, a loved one whose brain *does not* fire when (say) he sees the picture of the beloved?<sup>20</sup> I imagine the person who has read a lot of cognitive science might find a doubt raised in her mind—does this person *really* love me? But it would be misguided

( $\aleph_0$ ). And this answer is, in a clear sense, absolutely right. But then, first, Wittgenstein points out that we might 'say, "How wonderful—to learn Aleph-null ( $\aleph_0$ ) numerals, and in so short a time! How clever we are!"' (LFM: 31). Then, second, he notes that now 'it is illuminating to ask, "What would it be like to learn only 100,000 numerals?"' (LFM: p. 31), rather than Aleph-null ( $\aleph_0$ ). For that highlights the sense in which our first reply was not strictly a numerical one.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, in line with functionalist thinking, mental states should be explained ('defined') by their causal roles: 'in principle, a machine . . . , a human being, a creature with a silicon chemistry . . . could all work much the same when described at the relevant level of abstraction, and . . . [so] it is just wrong to think that the essence of our minds is our "hardware"' (Putnam (1988): xii).

<sup>20</sup> Compare Fisher (2004): especially 56–64.

to give weight to this sort of example,<sup>21</sup> as two cases clearly illustrate. First, consider building up the correlation: if, at that stage, there are cases where the relevant part of the brain does not fire as predicted, these must simply count against any such generalization. Why? Because we do not have *independent* access here to both *what X feels* and to his/her brain states; and only independent access would allow us to build up a correlation *detached* from the reports of persons. Yet, in the nature of the beast (reflecting Pinker's point), one cannot have such *independent* access. So we must determine which brain states are under consideration by first granting the accuracy of the personal reports (in their behavioral context). And that would mean recognizing the imagined scenario as a counterexample to one's thesis about which part of the brain is involved in 'beloved-recognition'.

Then, second, there is a big mistake in *priority* here, akin to giving a modern creativity test to, say, Mozart or Picasso—if the test scores show (or seem to show) that Mozart or Picasso were not creative (if they score low) . . . well, so much the worse for the test. And this too relates to the structure of building-up the correlations that 'validate' the test: since we know the 'creativity status' of Mozart and Picasso (they are!), this knowledge can become data in evaluating the test. And the same goes for our lovers: their love is the case from which the whole discussion began. Hence there is no (useful) inference to be drawn from the facts as described to the standard concern, 'He/she loves me, he/she loves me not'. (Indeed, one might as well be pulling the petals off a daisy!) Thinking otherwise just *takes for granted* what is, or should be, at issue in current theory about how brain states instantiate psychological ones.

This means, of course, that no great weight can be attached to this way of cashing out the metaphor of the matching of psychological states, and hence of the success or otherwise of empathy: it may have seemed a promising strategy, but it never can be.

The moral here may be hard to see, but it is this: there is no finite totality of powers and capacities here to which empathetic 'matching' could aspire—hence there is no 100% match, no 70% match, and so on. Rather the whole model of 'matching' is a humanistic confection, a metaphor to which no numerical weight can be given. And this despite our recognizing that our empathy is often limited, and our explaining its limitations in terms of a failure to 'match'. So my point is not that we lack a clear idea of what represents a total match, nor that there is insufficient matching in some cases, nor (again) that we do not know if there is 'matching'. Rather, my objection is to the whole metaphor of matching: since there is no finite totality of features to consider, any detailed idea of matching is rendered incoherent if we try to use it as the kind of success condition needed—and its incoherence is inherited by the picture of empathy it sustains.

<sup>21</sup> With Bernard Williams (1981: 18), we may think this 'one question too many'. For a discussion along my lines, see Frankfurt (2004): 36ff.

## 12.4 Empathy and Text-Processing: Some Empirical Considerations?

One thought might be that empirical investigations of empathy (and related phenomena) may sharpen our understanding. For instance, in her perceptive discussion, Amy Coplan (2004: 147) urges that it is 'the lack of consensus among scholars concerning the definition of empathy' that renders problematic a debate in the philosophical literature. By way of clarification, she turns to some psychological literature, commenting '[i]t is in part because of the confusion in the [philosophical?] literature regarding the meanings of these terms ['empathy', 'emotional contagion', 'identification'] that I developed my account of empathy on the basis of models in psychology' (Coplan 2004: 147). Further, she draws explicitly on some of the empirical findings of psychology. Here, I will comment briefly on some of the detail to which she appeals, as well as on her general procedure, selecting her discussion for its strengths (especially its clarity) rather than any deficiencies<sup>22</sup>—although my own predisposition is to find such psychology a collection of 'experimental methods and *conceptual confusion*' (PI p. 197<sup>23</sup>)!

Coplan's paper uses 'recent relevant empirical work on text processing and narrative comprehension' (Coplan (2004): 141): that is, she deploys work on texts (and hence on *reading* more generally). So, we are already discussing empathy in the contexts of *texts*, a small plus given that our interest is ultimately in novels. What should we make of this material?

First, one difficulty is partly *methodological*: do the so-called 'data' bear on the real issues? The intention here must be to replace armchair psychology, or—as Guyer (2005: 335) augments the list—'concert-hall or gallery psychology', with *real* psychology. But then success, if granted, at best involves what passes for proof in psychology; philosophy has a different set of obligations. In particular, philosophy must avoid, as various *causal fallacies*, giving weight to what one can in fact believe, or how one came to this belief (given one's general background). Thus, it can never be philosophically revealing that, say, so-and-so *thinks* or *claims* to be unable to imagine such-and-such, if the topic is the limits of imagination. Hence it cannot be helpful to line up, via a survey, a collection of such people. For, if the issue is whether or not they can, say, *imagine* such-and-such, the constraints cannot be *of the same kind* as those these experiments invoke. The same might apply to the 'psychological' data presented here.

But let us put such points aside. Then, second, consider the issue of narrative comprehension: we are offered psychological research in which 'readers were experiencing the narrative from the spatio-temporal standpoint of the protagonist' (Coplan (2004): 141). But also, and without comment, research which concluded that adult

<sup>22</sup> My model here is Austin (1962): 1: 'I choose them for their merits and not for their deficiencies.'

<sup>23</sup> My use of the 50th Anniversary edition of *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein (2001)) means that the pagination for Part Two is different from that usually employed.

readers (certainly the ones of most interest for aestheticians) regularly 'take up an internal perspective (i.e. the perspective within the framework of the story)' (Coplan (2004): 142). In this second case, of course, no specific character is identified: hence, even were this the basis for an emotional reaction, no empathetic response would be possible—there is no one with whom to empathize!

Further, third, the issue of 'emotional dimensions of a point of view', explained as 'how readers process characters' emotions' (Coplan (2004): 142) and as treating 'the emotional implications of a narrative from the standpoint of one of the protagonists' (Coplan (2004): 142). Now, it is far from clear that these are equivalent. But one justification—rightly voiced by Coplan—is that the literature contains no sustained treatment of the relevant issues; that we must do our best to pull together whatever is revealing.

One question here also is broadly methodological: for the results draw on the thought that 'target sentences matching the character's emotions [in some passage] should be processed more quickly than sentences not matching it' (Coplan (2004): 143). That was the prediction; and, we are told, '[t]his was exactly what they found' (Coplan (2004): 143). But what exactly could be the test for one sentence being 'processed more quickly' than another? Is it that one understands more quickly? One set of problems here comes from the term 'processed'—what exactly is that, and how does it differ, for a sentence, from the more commonly recognized 'processes', such as reading and understanding? It seems that there is some test here, such that the psychologists could determine whether or not the relevant processing had taken place. But surely what is needed is to gauge when the sentence was appropriately *understood*: that will not be readily quantified. Further, note that both reading and understanding can be 'completed' partially or sketchily, to some degree or other, such that one might go back to read again or to understand more. Can one similarly *process* sentences to some degree or other? If so, what degree of such processing was required to count, in the experiment, as having processed? And, if not, how can such 'processing' be *informative* about reading and understanding, given that they can be partial?

A related set of problems comes from the term 'quickly'. (Compare, too, reference to another study looking at who would 'read the emotional attribution more quickly': Coplan (2004): 143.) For how would one know how quickly something *read* had been understood? Suppose I ask you to read a passage and to raise your hand when you have read it: here we have a clear sense of 'more quickly' for reading—whoever's hand goes up first was the quickest. And then we might want to test whether or not our winner had read *all* the words. But, for our experiment, is merely having *read* enough? One's level of understanding of the passage might be relevant: how fully or completely have you understood? Or, even, have you understood it at all? (Perhaps I could read a passage phonetically but very quickly, as I might read a passage in a foreign language, without understanding it—that would not do.) And might there not be very many factors relevant here? For instance, the vocabulary used (not to mention the language) might affect reading and comprehension differentially, without the difference

reflecting differences in one's identification with the position described: they might simply grasp the words less well, rather than the emotions. The difficulty is that these all seem like instruments too blunt to determine the character of the responses to these stories. (And, of course, one complicates the task hugely by offering an account from a literary work—and, perhaps, complicates it again by selecting the passage from literary works where this seems especially problematic: say, James Joyce's *Ulysses*.)

Then again is the *right* gloss put on the empirical evidence, even granting its conclusions? Does it lead us automatically to consider *empathy*? Suppose instead that the empirical research (either this lot, or something similar) arrived at the unsurprising conclusion that the participants in these experiments could better understand—even if they persist in treating *better* in terms of more quickly—when they could *sympathize* with the protagonists: that is, when they could grasp the problems, issues, concerns of the protagonists. Then suppose sympathy 'involves caring about another individual—feeling for another' (Coplan (2004): 145). Of course, this cannot be how its *authors* understand this research material: but their perspective is not automatically correct. Would a reading in terms of, roughly, *sympathy* offer a plausible alternative? (This might reflect a general methodological question here: is no other explanation possible?)

Well, this 'sympathy' talk, understood this way, sounds exactly like what one needs to explain, for instance, making sense of some stories ('emotionally charged narratives' (Coplan (2004): 143) at the center of the research design discussed here. In the stories there deployed, protagonists meet a doctor to discuss the results of a brain scan. Yet, while the official topic concerns the audience's identification with the protagonists of the narratives, the actual research protocol reflects—not *understanding* as such—but the relative speed of 'processing', and hence of response. But is that necessarily empathetic? In those cases, what is needed is to understand what that person is feeling: either knowing (for the informed narratives) that the protagonist understands that 'major problems' (Coplan (2004): 143) have been ruled out, or (for the uninformed) that this was so, *even though* the protagonist did not know it, would facilitate understanding what the protagonist was feeling, perhaps. For I recognize the different degrees of distress appropriate to the different conditions of knowledge. Further, it seems entirely likely in such cases that I might then 'focus on the protagonist's feelings' (Coplan (2004): 143), rather than the 'objective situation'. But why should that suggest that I am *identifying* with those feelings? And, in particular, why should I be taking up the protagonist's perspective, so as to 'imaginatively experience, to some degree or other, what he or she experiences' (Coplan (2004): 143)? First, this is not an experience I should want for myself; nor can I think, as I might for a literary fiction, that I am caught up in it; second, if one wants to explain my concern with that protagonist, it is unnecessary for my experience to be identificatory—the appeal to a sympathetic response on my part is quite sufficient.

So it is not clear that this discussion really requires an *empathy*-reading; hence that it really exemplifies that '*empathetic* perspective taking is a standard part of the readers' engagement with narrative fictions' (Coplan (2004): 143; my emphasis).

Of course, the distinctive feature required for such a characterization as *empathy* returns us to our emphasis on the *achievement* of empathy: it would then involve stressing the involvement of 'emotions that are *qualitatively the same* as those of the target' (Coplan (2004): 144). But, as our discussion of interpersonal empathy illustrated, this feature is inherently problematic. For it returns us to the 'matching' theme. Perhaps, after all, it makes sense for my emotional state to be *qualitatively the same* as that of another person, although this too might be disputed.<sup>24</sup> Whatever we make of that case, how could one guarantee *qualitatively the same* emotions, when the 'subject' of the 'match' for my emotions is a character in a novel? For that character's emotional states are whatever the novelist puts into them—in this fashion, they are *closed* in a way mine, or any other person's, are not. Any emotional states ascribed to that character will be answerable to some passage in the novel, while no such requirement operates for *my* emotional states. In another way, the character's emotional states are *under-described* (relative to *real* states) in ways mine are not: their duration and intensity is left uncharacterized to the degree that these details are not written-up, while mine depend on how I presently feel, together with my dispositions, and such like.<sup>25</sup> So, while there is no finite totality of properties for *my* emotional states,<sup>26</sup> the dependence of the character's emotional states on the text means that *his/her* states are circumscribed by that text. Yet, in turn, that must speak against our states being (definitely) *qualitatively the same*.

Here we might, with profit, return to Nick Hornby: if we took the narrative of *Fever Pitch* to be just autobiographical, we might see the 'matching' emotional states required for empathy in terms of Hornby's own states. But, then, do we extract our understanding of these states from the book or the man? If from the book, we have made no progress over other examples; if from the man, the book now seems irrelevant.

Further (a topic for the next section), how is this empirical data even possibly relevant for the *art case* (namely, the novel), when it is drawn for the 'regular' interpersonal relations case? What debatable assumptions would we be importing if we thought it was?

## 12.5 And What About Literature?

So far we have considered some reasons why talk of empathy is not likely to be revealing vis-à-vis aesthetic matters: namely, that the failure conditions for *achievement* of empathy seem inherently problematic and ill-suited to dealing with fictional narratives—it certainly does not reflect our usual mode of engagement with literary

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, Malcolm (1977): 104–32, especially 115–29.

<sup>25</sup> And, of course, to dispute much of *this* is just to dispute the idea of a psychological *state*.

<sup>26</sup> A simplified version of the argument here, applied to description quite generally, is in McFee (2000): 117–24.

works, such as stories,<sup>27</sup> even when we identify with central characters. The psychological literature offers neither a compelling reason to conceptualize understanding narrative fictions in terms of such empathy nor a clear picture of what emotions being *qualitatively the same* would mean here.

In the examples above, discussions of empathy sometimes use the term 'reading' and its cognates when addressing our understanding of other people. Thus Goldie (2000: 195) writes, 'I have a grasp of a narrative which I can imaginatively enact, with the other as narrator—but this requirement is for empathy quite generally (that is, for interpersonal empathy): its references to *narratives* and *narrators* are at best figurative, or some such, picking out how the 'other' understands his life. Some cases, considered earlier, seem to reflect a kind of proto-reading: 'text processing'. Yet other cases are clearly concerned with reading in general.

Therefore, as implied above, a powerful line of objection is open to aestheticians, questioning the *relevance* of this material. For are the discussions here about *art* (that is, *literary fiction*)? Or just about (any old) narrative fiction? We know that there is a distinction here, even if few would insist on it in *my* terms.<sup>28</sup> And both *what* is seen and *how* it is seen can matter. Thus (on a parallel) Wollheim's baby daughter, photographed in his *Painting as an Art* (1987: 54) looking at a painted image, is not seeing *art*, although (a) she is looking at an artwork, and (b) she is seeing (and arguably recognizing) a depiction: and that fact is crucial to understanding what is going on in that case. So, is the investigation here research into (the literary versions of) *art* and *artistic judgment*? To put the case simply, should the conclusions, if accurate, apply as well to kinds of lightweight novels that are the standard fare of airport lounges<sup>29</sup> as to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering Heights*, and vice versa? My thought is that empathetic reading of the kind envisaged by its 'fans' is more likely in the first set of cases,<sup>30</sup> perhaps because I imagine the appeal of such texts resides in the identifications their readers make. Certainly, nothing here (yet) refers to the specific kind of *value* for the literary.

<sup>27</sup> As Coplan ((2004): 151 note 35) notes, some writers—she cites Susan Feagin in her excellent *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation* (Feagin (1996))—take some other process to underlie both interpersonal empathy and empathetic reading of literature. In Feagin's case, her choice (*simulation*) seems to me a further level of going back beyond the beginning. Like Searle (2002: 69), and for similar reasons, I am puzzled by this technical use of the term 'simulation'; for, as he writes of the everyday use, 'simulation should not be confused with duplication, whether the subject-matter is the mind, or anything else'.

<sup>28</sup> On my version (see McFee (2005)), terms such as 'beautiful' amount to something different applied to artworks than they do applied to non-art objects of aesthetic appreciation. Although the correct explanation here lies in the occasion-sensitive uses of these terms, I occasionally put the point loosely by saying that such terms are 'systematically ambiguous' (McFee (2005): 384)—this version puts bluntly what is 'one step too far' for most aestheticians.

<sup>29</sup> In the UK, these might well be called 'bodice-ripper' or 'bonk-buster' novels: expressions for a certain kind of quasi-romantic work of fiction (not to be mistaken for literature) perhaps familiar from the writings of Posy Simmonds (*Gemma Bovary* (2000)) and Helen Fielding (*Bridget Jones's Diary* (1997)—including Hollywood's version!).

<sup>30</sup> We should also remind ourselves that the category choice here is not limited to 'bodice-ripper or Booker Prize candidate'.

Now, rather than asking, 'Is, for instance, *reading such-and-such literary work* best understood as an exercise of empathy?', we should ask:

- In contrast to what? (So, how *else* might it be explained?)
- In what circumstances?

This issue, for us, would not just be about *reading* in general (which is surely rarely or never empathetic; see below) nor even *reading a literary work*. For both of these are insufficiently particular—we may need to go further: say, by contrasting the reading of *this* literary work with the reading of that one; or even considering sections within each.

But, to get a starting point, what is ordinary, non-art, *reading* like? Is that even possibly 'empathy-involving'? (For most cases, I'd say, 'no'.) Could reading a car manual or a typical newspaper article be understood empathetically? While I see no need to preclude either absolutely, in both cases the suggestion would at least involve a *peculiar* reading of the text—for example, I do not need empathy to agree with the newspaper article's conclusions about, say, George W. Bush's foreign policy as it applies in Iraq: I need only both to follow the article's argument (thereby seeing that it is validly formed) and to grant the truth of its premises—perhaps on the basis of other material it includes. For the article, as I imagine it, should move me by *logic*. While the conclusion may have an affective component in its content, regarding the piece as an *argument* means that this conclusion is not reached by affect alone. Even if our journalist relied instead on rhetorical force to 'arrive' at his conclusion, what moved me then was not identification: it was... well, rhetoric! That is to say, the *writing*, and not (for instance) the psychological states of its writer. And, of course, conclusions driven solely by affect *here* are likely to be rightly dismissible as sentimental. Further, merely *sharing* the emotion should be contrasted with empathizing. Moreover, *whatever* taking an empathetic stance would involve, it certainly does not amount to matching the affect of the author of either the article or the manual. While the article's author may *have* some affective position (I assume the manual's author does not), understanding either work is certainly not equivalent to some kind of *matching* of that sort. To see this clearly, assume that the article is in a conservative newspaper, with a stance with which its author disagrees. But he cannot get work published elsewhere. So the tone of the piece is not *his* tone.

Again, this is revealing: when we come to literary artworks too, it is only infrequently (even when empathy is important) that the view of the real *author* herself—that person—is at issue when the discussion of empathy is introduced. And we recognized that fact much earlier. This suggests, of course, the obvious point—again, embodied in the standard definitions—that empathy centrally involves, as a key part, *affect*. Hence there will be no purchase for an empathy-based explanation of affectless objects (the car manual) and affect-irrelevant objects (the newspaper article; and also the philosophy paper)—of course, saying this is not saying anything profound.

We have suggested, though, that *empathy* (as opposed to mere *intended empathy*) requires a 'matching' of the other's psychological state—that 'no match, no empathy'. And, in so far as that psychological state has an affective dimension, that too must be matched.

But what constrains that affect; and especially its understanding by a reader? Above, I deliberately chose cases where this might be problematic: for instance, where the central character is a woman, and often a woman of a past era—to what degree can I, as a male of this era, empathize there? In another language,<sup>31</sup> does the airport-lounge novel *address* me as, say, a Victorian woman? Well, its doing so cannot require that I be (say) a Victorian woman, or it would have no audience. So what weaker condition is required? It would be odd to *deny* that I can make *anything* of such a narrative, at least in typical cases: that grants too much by way of limitations on our imaginative powers.

So could a fictional narrative address me *as a woman*? Well, the term 'woman' here has no specific content as such: it needs to be augmented in terms of the powers, capacities, and so on thereby assumed for, or attributed to, *women*. If artworks can require, for their understanding, an audience suitably knowledgeable and suitably sensitive,<sup>32</sup> there seems no reason to preclude some version of this requirement for understanding, even for fictional works *not art*, such as those from our airport lounge. So there could be (in principle) an implied audience for such a novel which assumed certain, say, *values*: then the novel assumes that its (appropriate) spectators *share*, or at least recognize, the values of, for instance, a Victorian woman (or a certain conception of Victorian women or Victorian femininity)—for example, I have read accounts of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* in these terms. Were they correct, my mastery of that novel (to the degree I can) might suggest that I have the requisite understanding.

We have recognized that a narrative that requires of its audience, say, understanding the values of, for instance, *Victorian women* cannot thereby require that the audience be composed of Victorian women. But does my *not* being a Victorian woman entail that I will *misperceive* the work in question? No doubt, in practice, I will: but is the requirement that I so misperceive a conceptual one, such that it follows no matter how sympathetic, sensitive, and well-prepared I am? Suppose that it does not: then the requirement here seems to be for a sympathetic recognition of the values, and such like. Then, viewed as a 'best case scenario' from the perspective of my knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity, a work which addresses me as a Victorian woman might do so *even though* I (personally) fail both aspects. Again, this situation seems both harmless and familiar to literary criticism (or art criticism more generally): namely,

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Wollheim (1987): 96: 'Necessarily communication is either addressed to an identifiable audience, as when a speaker answers a question put to him by another or when an orator harangues an audience, or is undertaken in the hope an audience will materialize, as when a shipwrecked sailor raises a signal of distress.'

<sup>32</sup> These are Richard Wollheim's requirements for an audience for *art*: compare, for instance: 'What is properly visible in the surface of the picture is a matter of what experiences appropriate information allows a sensitive spectator to have in front of it' (Wollheim (1993): 189).

as building-in the assumed values of an audience for this novel, or whatever—and then some discussion would follow about what happened when those assumptions were not met, either wholly or to some degree.

As I imagine such a case, the difficulties here concern my specific (and hence in principle remediable) ignorance—or some such. These difficulties are essentially practical, generated by what I do not know, or by values I do not currently share and cannot adopt ‘in imagination’.

We should, of course, contrast this case with an imaginary one where—since I am not a Victoria woman—the work *cannot* engage with me: where the ‘bar’ here is somehow *conceptual* or *logical*. But it is much harder to envisage what exactly precludes *in principle* my coming to the appropriate understanding. For instance, does this particular work automatically address me and, say, a female colleague *differentially*? That is, so that the differences did not come down to ones about our relative experience, knowledge, and so on: differences like that would be remediable *in principle*. I would say ‘no’: for what, exactly, am I supposed *necessarily* to lack? If the issues concern values, or understanding, or even empathy, there seems no reason to regard these as *in principle* beyond a super-sympathetic me. But, if that is right, then there could be no such case of ‘*in principle*’ unintelligibility.

Of course, in reality, compared to our stylized Victorian woman, there are certain perceptions I do not share, certain values I do not have, certain narratives of art (and similar) in which I *cannot* locate the work under discussion, as our candidate Victorian woman could—and certain narratives ‘second-nature’ to me which are unavailable to her. Yet all (or at least, most) of this would be equally true of a contemporary female colleague: so that suggestion simply replicates in more detail our general point about the need for a suitably knowledgeable, suitably sensitive audience. And that just reinstates, with more detail given, the case sketched above. But we have no reason to expect a single uniform resolution to the difficulty which these cases indicate: hence, no neat account of the place of my knowledge, values, and such like in my making sense of fictional narratives.

Then how would the cases where we simply have a narrative text differ from confronting a work of literature? Our previous discussion offers an object of comparison. We have already asked to what extent I can enter the emotional world of a woman from South America. The case might be posed sharply by my ‘identification’ (or something similar) in my reading of a literary work, such as Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s novel *The Queen of the South* (2002)<sup>33</sup>, where the central character is *exactly* the kind of South American gangsterista described earlier. Perhaps what a psychologically-driven novel of this sort can offer differs from my knowledge of such a *real* person, if I could get it—here at least I know a lot of facts about that central character, Teresa Mendoza, including psychological ones.

<sup>33</sup> Put aside the issue of my reading a translation!

As already noticed, this case differs substantially from the case of interpersonal empathy, in that the psychology to which I must 'match' is one specified, to the degree that it is, by the author, along with those presuppositions about persons his practice imports.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, this feature points in two directions. On the one hand, Teresa Mendoza's psychological states are more circumscribed than those of a real person: all there is to know of them is from the text. Hence we can know all (but only) what the text offers us. For we can have before us all the words that comprise it. On the other hand, the text can leave certain questions unanswered (and hence unanswerable). Supposedly, no answer to L. C. Knights's question,<sup>35</sup> 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?', was forthcoming *from the text*: each real woman has some determinate number of children, including none; but this inference cannot be drawn for fictional characters. For if there is no information in the text, there can be no *fact of the matter* on this topic. The same is true of psychological states: each real woman was in some psychological state or other (including being anaesthetized) at a particular time. We cannot reliably say this for fictional women: again, there may be no *fact of the matter*, if (say) the novel is silent.

This gives us some leeway when we turn again to 'matching' here: we are not trying to match the (fixed?) psychological states of some person at some particular time. Instead, we will do the best we can on the basis of the author's words. But then one's reading of a novel can make concrete the emotional states of its protagonists, where there may be more than one way of unfolding those states (whether or not this is true of real persons). That, in turn, points us towards some explanatory mechanisms and away from others. So my ultimate strategy is this: to find two different occasions superficially similar. If one's relation to an artwork were (correctly) explained *differently* on two occasions—as answers to two different *questions*, as it were—this speaks against reducing that explanation to anything plausibly the same on both occasions; say, to brain states, or to the firing of groups of neurons (or whatever is the preferred neurological explanation today). Then we have a basis for not drawing on neurophysiology to explain empathy in the case of literature (or anywhere?).

Perhaps an example might work as follows. You notice my fascination with Teresa in *The Queen of the South*, my treating all the events from her perspective (facilitated by the way the novel was written): asked to explain this 'reading', I do so in terms of empathetic engagement—to the degree that I can manage—with Teresa. And I explain this, as classically, in terms of a 'matching' of our psychological states, at least to some degree. This makes sense to you, as a fan of the idea of empathetic readings of novels.

<sup>34</sup> Another case here: would my possibilities for empathy be stronger if, instead of Teresa, we considered my reading about the life of fellow Scot and fellow philosophy student Isabel Dalhousie, in (say) *The Right Attitude to Rain* (McCall Smith (2006))? For real people, the similarities between my world and hers would clearly be a relevant consideration, seeming to facilitate empathy (as noted earlier). But, for novels, the quality of the *writing* seems more important.

<sup>35</sup> The title of an essay in Knights (1964).

But now your brother asks me about that novel. When I describe the novel and its events to him, I adopt an *internal perspective* (see above) all right, but without characterizing the events of the novel just from Teresa's emotional perspective. Thus, with the 'blurb',<sup>36</sup> we agree that '[y]ou are inexorably drawn into Teresa's world', such that 'one is left wondering where Teresa is today': and, in summary, are struck by 'the author's ability... to plumb the recesses of a character's psyche'. But none of these moves is explained in terms of *taking* her emotional perspective, as opposed to merely understanding it. (So there need be no 'matching' in this case.)

In both of these discussions (as elsewhere), I am being scrupulously honest: your brother put the question about themes and ideas within the novel with a slightly different emphasis or tone—so that I answered, in effect, a different question. But, at base, there is only one reading of the novel (mine): I respond differently to each of you, but that does not leave me with two readings of the novel. Or, more exactly, it certainly *need* not. Hence my first, 'empathetic' reading cannot amount to certain brain states of mine at the time I offer it. For, at that time, I might have said either of these things—so the states of my brain when reading the novel sustain (at least) two 'readings' of it. Yet, one might say, there is but one brain state at issue (mine). Thus there can be no simple equation of brain state to 'reading' nor vice versa. Then, whatever we decide to say about interpersonal empathy—which will no doubt reflect our predilections in the philosophy of mind more generally—we should recognize the need to say something different here, faced with a case of artistic judgment.

Thus, one crucial factor, mentioned previously, is that this case deals with objects of literary *art*, not with (mere) fictions. That, in turn, sets limits on the resources required to make sense of the work. As Roger Scruton (2000: 21) recognizes, from the perspective of a *critical reading*:

[i]n the nature of things, the arguments of a critic are only addressed to those who have sufficient reverence for literature; for only they will see the point of detailed study and moral investigation.

As such, we must treat the work of literature differently from other fiction, granting it value of a different *kind* (see McFee (2005): 379). So, again, that makes it less likely that we can import 'insight' from empathy in the interpersonal case to the empathetic reading of literature.<sup>37</sup>

## 12.6 Conclusion

I have followed a path from my own experiences of what might seem a hyper-empathetic reading by considering whether a comparison with interpersonal empathy is likely to be revealing in respect of the empathetic reading of fictions: in particular,

<sup>36</sup> These quotations all come from the publicity materials to the 2005 Blume edition.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, this is not yet to explain *empathy* in this context, with Aurel Kolnai (1978: 209), as 'arbitrary subjective fantasy'!

how badly it reflects the *achievement* character of empathy. And, concluding that (at least) empathetic reading of fictions was not likely to be the norm, I have shown how some of the material from psychology that might seem to support such a reading cannot offer the promised help. Further, I have suggested that the peculiarities of the *artistic* case (here, the novel) require an account all of its own, if at all. To end, I will mention another example: perhaps it shows us something useful about a more humanistic picture of empathy in art appreciation.

At the end of the film *Cast Away* (2000), the Tom Hanks character looks wistfully after the young woman whose package he had saved during his time on the island, and finally delivered. There are no words: he has already considered the other three dusty roads away from the junction. He smiles slightly. Seen one way, we do not know what he is going to do; there is no explicit clue. Perhaps, in the minutes after the screen goes dark, he will look elsewhere, and drive off in one of the other directions. But if, throughout his tribulations, we have been identifying to some degree with the character Hanks plays, we know he will follow her. And a part of our understanding lies in our sharing both his sense of having nowhere to go and his seeing her as offering some possibilities for a life. Is our understanding of that character *empathetic*? I do not know. But it does not seem to depend on any precise 'matching' of our psychological states—at best, I understand his state, and that understanding is evocative. There is a kind of identification, but it is certainly not the kind from which I began, in respect of *The Leopard*. Perhaps this is the only moment in the film in which we feel this degree of identification. But that is a strength of that moment, and of the film. And perhaps this is the moment we should seek to understand.

# PART III

# Empathy and Morality