

IDENTIFYING WITH CHARACTERS IN LITERATURE

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We understand stories, poems, plays, novels and are moved by them. We say, "I know the play *Oedipus Rex*." What sort of knowing? We shudder when Oedipus puts his wife-mother's brooch to his eyes, and the shudder does not stop when we say "It's only a play, no man is really putting brooch to eyes." For it is the thought, the imagination of the thing, that thrills. But what sort of feeling is this that neither rests on beliefs about the world nor leads to desires to be satisfied in it? We *appreciate* works of literature, and appreciation has both cognitive and affective dimensions. Imagination touches each of them: we entertain them in imagination.

I have an account of the appreciation of literature which begins to answer the questions above. It is not complete but captures what I take to be central, namely, that to be able to fully appreciate a work of literature one must *empathetically identify* with its characters, where the identification is the outcome of an experiment in imagination whose design is the literary work itself. In this paper I will describe the kind of knowledge the identification brings in its stead; I will not give an account of how feelings occasioned by the identification differ from those occasioned by life but will indicate the direction an account should take.

Empathetic identification with characters, not to be confused with imaginative projection of ourselves into their predicaments, nor with bonds forged by our sympathy for them, yields knowledge of what it is like to be the characters, knowledge of the subjective, the subject's side of things. Knowledge by acquaint-

tance where the acquaintance is made in imagination. Without it, works of art in which there are characters cannot be appreciated. For to know *that* Iago hates Othello for having promoted another over him is to know Iago and his passion from the outside. This is knowledge suited to social science, its object is the outsides of things, under the aspect of general laws. The experience of art, on the other hand, gives us the immediate and the particular, Iago and his passion inseparable.

My account will take the form of a rational reconstruction, not a phenomenological description, of what we do when we respond to literature; therefore, the remark "But I don't do that sort of thing" does not constitute an objection to it. For whatever we *do* takes place in time, and the steps in the reconstruction are logical, not temporal, steps. The reconstruction is a construction out of certain plausible assumptions about (i) the distinction between characters and real people, (ii) interpretations of literary works, and (iii) points of view and literature's worlds.

What follows is, also, the beginning of the analysis of a kind of knowledge of ourselves and others. We are acquainted with our own experiences by having them, with those of others by *imagining* having them, but the direct acquaintance with our own experiences afforded by merely having them is not sufficient for knowledge. It is necessary that we be able to imagine them at a later time. Experiences are momentary, knowledge is not. Knowledge had only for a moment does not count as knowledge, experiences forgotten as soon as they are had hardly count as experiences of ours. Knowledge of our experiences is, then, I suggest, by way of imagination.

It may be argued that acquaintance with the experiences of others is, in certain circumstances, a requirement of morality, namely, the requirement that we decide our actions in light of knowledge of their effects on others. Not simply the knowledge that the effects will be such and such, but knowledge of *what it is like* to experience such and such. We learn this by empathetically identifying with, in turn, each of those to be affected by each of the actions we are deliberating. The decision about what actually to do depends, for example, on whether utility, equality, or individual's rights is to be valued most highly, and therefore the requirement that we know what it is like for others to suffer the effects of our actions is compatible with a range of moral theories. Its relevance to the present task is that the identification is encountered in its pure form in the appreciation of literature. The appreciation may be seen as propaedeutic to the appreciation of our effects on other people and the account below as a small part of a moral theory.

I

Only some works of literature have characters. In general, novels, short stories, and plays do and poems do not. The *Iliad* is a poem rife with characters and

its author a genius at characterizing them, but such counterexamples to the general rule and the overlapping problems of genre and style need not worry us. What we call particular works that have characters is of no moment, what is meant by "character" is. I mean by it at least this : whoever is one is not; nor ever was, an inhabitant of the real world. Histories, then, do not have characters, while Shakespeare's historical plays are not about the kings and queens who walked abroad. They are about the characters Shakespeare created. "About" is equivocal here. Histories are about kings and queens in that they refer outside themselves to real people ; plays are about their characters in that the actions and events of the play revolve about them. What is the relation between Henry VI of *Henry VI* and Henry VI of England ? Many of the same things are true of each of them, and the reason Shakespeare endowed the play's Henry with certain characteristics is that the real Henry had them. This hardly constitutes a relation between them, though some may say it does.

Real people *have* characters, i.e. they have personalities, or, at least, characteristics, and some people have character, i.e. a certain moral fiber. But they, *are* not characters. We are, it is true, sometimes said to be characters ; what is meant then is that we are eccentric, strange, that we stand out, not in a good way, as heroes and saints do, but in a way that lends itself to ridicule. People in works of fiction, on the other hand, *are* characters, if they are anything.

Saul Kripke's theory of proper names puts into focus the distinction between real people and "people" in literature. The theory is that proper names are neither logically nor materially equivalent to any set of descriptions of the individuals whose names they are. (Names would be logically equivalent to descriptions which gave their meaning, materially equivalent to descriptions which fixed their reference.) Names are rigid designators, they designate the same individual in any possible world. We can, then, imagine an individual's still being itself even if all of its characteristics were other than they are ; we need suppose only that it is the same kind of thing. In particular, we can imagine *our* still being ourselves even if all of our characteristics were other. We cannot imagine Desdemona's being herself if all or even many of her characteristics were to change, however. She is identical with some subset, if not all, of her descriptions, and she is nothing but them. She is a character and lives, therefore, in a work of art, not in the real world. So it is with all characters. Their names do not rigidly designate and they are not individuals. Individuals are real in our world ; characters are real-in-the worlds posited by the works in which they appear.

The simplest criterion of identity of characters is that one is the *same* as the other, at a given moment in their world, just in case all of their characteristics are

the same, and something *is* a character just in case it has at least one characteristic typically ascribed to human beings. If the characteristic is typically and only ascribed to humans, then the kind of thing that has it need not even be human in order to be a character. Animals and magical creatures qualify, as fairy tales and animal stories attest.

II

So simple a criterion suffices for my purpose, which is to show that the responsive understanding of literature involves an experiment in imagination whose performance consists in empathetically identifying with each of a work's characters, discovering thereby how it feels to be each of them and to be part of the network of relations that constitute their world. The identification, the acquaintance with the character, occurs in imagination, the empathy in one's own affective structure. The knowledge is immediate, therefore. It is corrigible as well. For it rests on an inference and a change in point of view, and if either goes wrong, knowledge of the character's subjective side is not achieved.

What goes on when we respond to characters can be reconstructed as follows. *First*, something is presented to our senses and what is presented is seen as a certain kind of thing or event. The curtain rises on a soldier approaching a lone other standing night watch on a platform before a castle, he identifies himself, two more soldiers enter, the first leaves. *Hamlet* has begun. Art does not traffic in kinds, however. We have seen the castle, the night, the guard's changing, but nothing has happened to us yet. There is at most expectation. What presents itself to eye is recognized by mind for the broad kind of thing it is, but only when heart engages does appreciation begin. "Heart" here does service for imagination and emotions, each standing as some sort of mean between sensation and cognition. And heart is soon engaged. "What! Has this thing appear'd again tonight?" "Tush, tush! 'twill not appear." "Peace! break thee off; look, where it comes again!" Enter ghost of Hamlet's father.

Second, we imagine that we are in the positions of Bernardo and Marcellus, to whom the ghost has twice appeared, and Horatio, who "will not let belief take hold of him." We discover what it is like to be in their positions by imagining that we are in them and discovering how *we* find it. Distinguish now between being in a certain position and having certain characteristics. It cannot be supposed that all people would have the same sorts of experiences were they to be in a particular position, P. But if all who imagined themselves in P imagined also that everything true of the play's character who is in P were true of them,

then it may be supposed that there is a strong family resemblance among the sorts of experiences they have. We imagine this further thing.

What we want to know, of course, is how the *characters* find being in their positions. Is this something to be known? Is there one and only one set of experiences properly called "Bernardo's experiences?" Or are his experiences simply whatever one thinks they are? Neither of these. There is, no doubt, always more than one possible interpretation of any work, and each interpretation may be said to stipulate a possible world. But for each interpretation there is one and only one set of experiences properly called "Bernardo's experiences." It is those he would have were the world in which he lives actual.

Third, we infer that how we find being in Bernardo's position, imagining all of his characteristics ours, is how *anyone* with his characteristics would find it. We infer, a fortiori, that this is how Bernardo finds it. Because our knowledge of Bernardo's subjective side is the result of an inference, it is corrigible. But the inference is not likely to fail for the reason that many an inference about the subjective side of a real person's experience fails, namely, that the design of the imaginative experiment and hence its outcome is tailored to fit the role and serve the interests of the experimenter. We are, perforce, impartial and disinterested in identifying with the characters. For the world in which our parts are played and interests lie is none of the possible worlds stipulated by different interpretations of the work. Therefore, the temptation to self-tailor the experiment in imagination can hardly arise in the case of the identification with characters in literature. It can fail for other reasons, but that is a story to be told elsewhere.

III

Every work of art that is appreciated at all is experienced under some interpretation or other. By "interpretation" I mean what is made of what is sense-given. "What is made" is the performance of the experiment in imagination. The design of the experiment is the fiction, its world intimated at the beginning, full drawn by the end. The performance is our empathetic identification with the characters who inhabit the imagined world of the fiction; we project ourselves into the world as one or another of its inhabitants. The world shaped by the words is the objective moment of the work, our imaginative identification with its characters, the subjective moment. Interpretation makes a unity of the two. Making something of the first moment involves making out what the words mean and what literary conventions have been used, making something of the second involves becoming, in turn, each of the characters. The meanings of the words and conventions point to what we are to imagine, but until we do

imagine, the words and conventions are not "alive." The feelings attending the imagination give them life.

Feelings aroused by events in our own lives need never and often do not become objective, i.e. objects of reflection. But they cannot fail to be subjective; for we have them, and we have them as ourselves, as subjects of our own biographies. Feelings aroused by characters in literature, on the other hand, cannot fail to be objective. For we have them not as ourselves but as one or another of the characters, external to us, themselves objects of reflection. Feeling responses to literature are tied to the subject of the response, of course. But to what in the subject? Not to its full particularity, its uniqueness. If works of art create their own worlds and are, therefore, to be appreciated for themselves, then to appreciate them we must lay aside what is particular about us, what marries us to our own world. What remains is the structure of the kinds of creatures we are. We do not, however, consider ourselves as "man in general," forgetting our "individual being" and "peculiar circumstances," as David Hume says the literary critic must. For we cannot imagine being "a man in general;" we can imagine only what is particular.

We are able to lay aside what is particular about us and adopt the characters' particularities precisely because we are not identical with what our descriptions name. Since characters are no more than their descriptions, when we imagine their descriptions applying to us and infer that the character finds its predicament as we find it, what the inference yields cannot be wrong for the reason that the character really finds its predicament another way. Characters are not only the descriptions given by the author. What interpretation can do is to elaborate the characters: "Hamlet could not kill Claudius because Claudius and Gertrude were one flesh, to kill him would be to 'kill' her. *This* Hamlet could not do." So one might say, and say fairly if what Shakespeare said was compatible with or, better, illuminated by this further description of Hamlet. If, however, the character's elaboration is not compatible with Shakespeare's text, then an inference based on the assumption of this further description's applying fails.

Although we cease to be ourselves in the empathetic identification, we do not become incapable of responding, as ourselves, to the work in which they appear. This sort of response is informed by a awareness that its object is an artwork and that the response itself comes from outside the work, and it is uninformed if not based on empathetic response to the work's world from within that world. The sorts of feelings and thoughts we have, as the various characters, are occasioned by and directed toward events and other characters within the artwork.

What underlies our feeling response to literature, the identification with its characters, is, then, not subjective in the familiar sense. No, it is objective in the sense that it regards the characters as objects rather than as subjects, centers of consciousness. In the identification, giving up our particularity and adopting theirs, we invest the characters with our subjectivity; they are not mere objects to us. In imagination, we have their feelings and thoughts.

IV

There is no logical difference between identifying with characters and with real people. Pieces of fine journalism point to this conclusion. Frances Fitzgerald, in *A Fire in the Lake*, captures the people and place of Vietnam in such a way that the work would hold us even if there were no place of green rice fields and delicate-boned people. She has so combined history, geography, culture and politics as to create as well as capture a world, giving back most of what the Pentagon's dessicated bodycount left out. In creating the reality of Vietnam, she forces recognition of the reality of the people whose land lies by Cambodia and Laos. The book has an ultimate moral purpose and a penultimate artistic one: to be itself a world. Shorn of its moral purpose, it stands as art because its "truth" lies not only in the faithfulness of its report on a real people but also in the coherence of its parts into a whole independent of the people whose story it is. It tells their story and would itself be a story if only there were no Vietnam. In reading it, one empathetically identifies with one who is Vietnamese and gains knowledge of what it would be like to be Vietnamese in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Since we can know what it would be like for all sorts of things to be true that are not, we can know what it would be like to be one of such a people, whether or not there are any.

We can, then, empathetically identify, impartially and disinterestedly, with real people met in literature, as well as with characters. (Not all literature is fiction.) And, what is important for morality, we can do the same with real people *not* met in literature. Morality may require both objectivity in our assessments of the effects of our actions, policies, and principles on others and a lively appreciation of the subjective side of others' experiences. We gain this appreciation by describing the probable effects of our decisions and then imagining ourselves in the place of those to be affected by them, with their characteristics, if they are known. Our experiencing in imagination what we are apt to cause in reality becomes part of our motive to perform or desist from the actions being deliberated. The more detailed our knowledge of the people to be affected or of the positions we will have put them in, the more lively our appreciation of our actions' effects and the less likely our inclination to treat people as objects. For we

are, in empathetically identifying with them, treating them as subjects of experiences.

To empathize with people, real or fictional, is to imagine having whatever feelings we suppose them to have as the result of our having imagined ourselves in their predicaments with their characteristics. To sympathize with them is to have one sort of feeling *toward* them ; the feeling is, of course, sympathy and those who are inclined to it are said to be sympathetic. We often feel sympathy for those whose pain we imagine, and sympathy plays a role in moral motivation but is peculiarly out of place in the identification with characters in literature. For us to have feelings toward Iago is as wrong headed as it would be for us to leap up on stage to inform Othello that Desdemona is faithful. Not only need we not feel sympathy toward those with whom we empathize, we hardly can sympathize with those whose pleasures we imagine ourselves having.

V

Fourth, we adopt Bernardo's point of view. In the first step of the reconstruction, our senses and mind are engaged, and in the second, our imaginations : we imagine being in the characters' positions and having their characteristics. In the third, we infer that the characters find their predicaments as we, in imagination, found them ; in this penultimate step, we abandon our own points of view and adopt the characters'. Points of view are not only "the essence of the internal world," they are also views *onto* a world, points from which the world is viewed. Suppose, now, that a particular character C has characteristics x, y, and z and is an inhabitant of world W. C is identical with x, y, z and is describable as "one who has x, y, z." But C is a unique point of view on W as well, and the experience of being the point of view on W of one who has x, y, z is *not* describable. This is why we can *imagine* having x, y, z, but we cannot imagine adopting C's point of view on W. We simply *adopt* it.

I have claimed that by empathetically identifying with Bernardo we can learn what it is like to be him. He is real-in-*Hamlet*, and what it is like to be him is a fact-in-*Hamlet* to which we are privy just in case we can enter the world posited by the play. And we can, if only we can adopt the various points of view of the characters there, where each *is* a different point of view on the same world. What must be the case for us to be able to do this ?

Thomas Nagel, in "What Is It Like to Be a Bat ?" suggests that we must be "sufficiently similar" to the kind of being whose point of view we hope to take in order to be able to take it.⁸ Bernardo, Marcellus, and Horatio are human-beings-in-*Hamlet*. Their kind is no different from ours. What about the ghost ? It

is the ghost of a human being. Its mode of being is different from that of the other characters in the play as theirs is different from ours. This is no difference in kind. If, however, it is argued that being solid is part of being human, that is all right. The ghost is sufficiently similar to our kind to enable us to adopt its point of view nonetheless. But how *do* we know that something is like enough for us to know what it is like to be that thing?

When we adopt Nagel's suggestion to fictional characters, it turns itself around. A character is similar enough to us for us to adopt its point of view if we *are able* to adopt it. A necessary condition for sufficient similarity was given by the second part of the criterion of identify for characters, namely, something is a character just in case it has at least one characteristic typically ascribed to human beings. If something does not have such a characteristic, it is not a character; if it is a character, we can identify with it under the description "one who has such and such a characteristic typically ascribed to human beings."

I can imagine that I am on nightwatch at the castle where the ghost of the newly dead king has appeared and that I am a soldier in the service of the new king of Denmark. In neither case am I imagining that I am not myself but am Bernardo, Danish soldier friend of Hamlet. If I take the further step, it is not to imagine being Bernardo but to adopt his point of view. For there is nothing describable as being Bernardo, and we can imagine only what we can describe or what we have already experienced. There is, I have claimed, something appropriately called "Bernardo's experiences," those he would have were he real, and being Bernardo just is having his experiences. His experiences, as his, refer back to him as to a point from which the world is viewed. To be him is to adopt this point of view. How do we know if we are able to adopt his point of view? By adopting it. How do we know when we have done this? When *Hamlet's* world is ours.⁹

VI

When *Hamlet's* world is ours, it can be grasped whole, as the real world cannot. For the real world intersects with history and will be complete only when time ends, whereas the artwork is complete when its artist pronounces it finished and we have interpreted it, performing the imaginative experiment which ends in the adoption, in turn, of the points of view of those who present themselves as the work unfolds. Then, we stand outside the work to survey and judge what we have made of what Shakespeare has given. This is the *fifth* and last step of the reconstruction: the response *to* the work experienced whole. The fact that the possible world of the work can be experienced as a whole does not, of course, mean that it can be perfectly understood. Only what is rational, what has

measure, can be understood. And what has measure can be measured, can be subjected to rule. Were the world of the artwork rule-ridden, the work would be showing what could as well be told, expressed in a general way, in a rule. Doubtless some works of art do no more than this.

Art that aspires to greatness must do more, however. It must show the incommensurabilities that lie at the bottom of things, the logical spaces that lie, for example, between the reasons for an action and the action, between the evidence for a belief and the belief. The artwork's world is not to be understood. It is to be appreciated. And it is to be appreciated in imagination, of which we can say what St. Augustine says of memory...“there I have in readiness even the heavens and the earth and the sea...there also I meet with myself.” (*Confessions* X).

POSTSCRIPT

Feelings given rise by empathetic identification with characters in literature are Desdemona's, Othello's, Ophelia's “real” feelings and our imagined feelings. How are they different from our real feelings? In their causes and objects, which are real only in the world of the artwork. The causes operate on us when we enter that world, the objects affect us as one of the world's inhabitants, not as ourselves.

Why are emotions unpleasant in life *not* unpleasant in art? Because the believed threat to one's well-being which makes them unpleasant in life is not present in art. There is nothing in the world of the work of literature that can harm *or* help one. The objects of imagined fear, jealousy, hatred threaten imagined harm, and the fact that imagined harm is not avoided, as real harm is, testifies to our living our lives not in imagination but in reality. Why call imagined fear “fear?” Because the kinds of things that serve as its causes and its objects are the same for imagined and for real fear. Too brief answers. No good theory of aesthetic emotions will be forthcoming, I believe, until we have a good theory of the emotions.

FOOTNOTES :

1. I would like to thank Peter Kivy for comments on an earlier version of this paper, which is sequel to my "Empathetic Identification" *American Philosophical Quarterly* XV, 2 (April 1978) 107-115. 2. This is the subject of Kendall L. Walton's provocative "Fearing Fictions," *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXV, 1 (January 1978) 5-27. 3. I consider in this paper the simplest case, literary works in which there are particular characters. There are other cases, for example, poems expressive of certain moods or states are appreciated when the reader identifies with one who is in the expressed mood or state. In some works, one identifies with the narrator, if there is one and there are no characters, or with some one of the people if none are singled out, or again with some one who is of the country if there are no people in the work, only place. 4. Thomas G. Pavel, "'Possible Worlds' in Literary Semantics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXXIV, 2 (Winter 1975) 165-176, shows the precise sense in which literary works can be said to be autonomous. 5. Saul Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (2d ed.; Dordrecht, 1972) 252-356. 6. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 1757. 7. Frances Fitzgerald, *A Fire in the Lake* (New York : Random House, 1973). 8. Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat ?" *The Philosophical Review* LXXXIII, 4 (October 1974) p. 442. 9. Pavel, in the work cited, says that each literary work contains its own ontological perspective and that the readers adopt the work's perspective when they consider true propositions which are true-in-the work and possible *de re* propositions which are possible-*de re*-in-the work.

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