

The Fiction of Paradox: *Really* Feeling for Anna Karenina¹

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It will be asked, how the drama moves, if it is
not credited.

Samuel Johnson (1765, 502)

'How can I feel compassion for a woman because she felt her life to be so intolerable that she threw herself under a train, when I know at the same time that there is no woman, no intolerable situation, and no train?' – this, in a nutshell, is the paradox of fiction². How can we be moved by what we know does not exist? In the same way it is irrational for someone to feel sorry for my daughter if they know I don't have one, or feel glad that I won the lottery if they know I haven't, it seems irrational to be moved by the fate of characters, like Anna Karenina or King Lear, we know never existed. And yet our own reactions to fictional characters tell us that we are often thus moved. In this chapter, I claim that the paradox fatally hinges on cognitive theories of emotion that generate positions which phenomenologically and intellectually misrepresent our experiences of art – such as Kendall Walton's *pretend theory* and Peter Lamarque's *thought theory*. I examine and reject these positions, and acknowledge the concept-formative role of *genuine* emotion generated by fiction. I then argue, *contra* Jenefer Robinson, that this 'éducation sentimentale' is not achieved through *distancing*, but precisely through literature's ability to *engage* our emotions. Literature does this, I claim, by its uniquely *perspicuous presentations* of emotional (and other) concepts and the *cognitive pleasure* that such 'presentations' prompt in us.

1. The paradox of fiction

The paradox consists of three premises which, taken individually, seem plausible, but are jointly inconsistent:

¹ I am greatly indebted to John V. Canfield, Frank Cioffi, Laurence Goldstein, Ylva Gustafsson and Michael McEachrane for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² As succinctly formulated by Jenefer Robinson (2005, 143).

1. we often experience emotions towards what we know to be *fictional* characters or situations
2. we can only experience emotions for objects that we believe exist
3. we do not believe fictional characters or situations exist

And so, the paradox consists in the claim that we have and yet cannot have emotions toward fictional objects. Philosophers have attempted to resolve or dissolve the paradox mostly by rejecting one of the three premises and claiming either that:

1. what we experience towards what we know to be *fictional* characters or situations are *not* emotions; that is, we are not *really* moved;
2. what moves us are not the fictional characters themselves, but
 - a) their real-life counterparts
 - b) the *thoughts* that they provoke in us
3. we *can* experience emotions for objects we don't believe exist

The third claim is made by philosophers who hold a noncognitive theory of emotion. I am of that ilk and so believe that we can be *really* moved by *fictional characters*, and that this does not generate a paradox – therefore my title: *the fiction of paradox*. But before joining the noncognitive contingent, let us briefly examine the opposition.

2. Kendall Walton: not emotions, but *quasi*-emotions

[The actor] on a stage plays at being another
before a gathering of people who play at taking
him for that other person.

Jorge Luis Borges³

On a *narrow* cognitive theory of emotions⁴, emotions require *beliefs* (in the existence of the object of one's emotion), which are linked to *desires* (that move us to action). On a *broad* cognitive theory of emotions, an emotion need only be accompanied by a propositional attitude; and that needn't be a belief, it can be a thought, a judgment, an

³ 'Everything and Nothing' *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 248.

⁴ Cf. Derek Matravers for the distinction between a 'broad cognitive theory' and a 'narrow cognitive theory' of the emotions (2006, 254).

imagining. Kendall Walton is a *narrow* cognitivist; he claims that we (ordinary viewers and readers) cannot experience genuine emotions towards fictional characters because we do not believe they exist, and that this absence of emotion is phenomenologically visible in the absence of desires that would be there in actual situations: we do not run away from the monster, attempt to stop Juliet from killing herself or organize a rescue mission to get Robinson Crusoe off his island. There is then, in the case of our reactions to fictional characters or events, neither *existential endorsement* nor *motivational upshot*. And this absence of the relevant beliefs and desires means, for Walton, that what we experience towards fictional characters cannot be emotions, but *quasi-emotions*: we do not really fear Dracula, pity Anna Karenina, hate Iago etc., but only experience *quasi-fear*, *quasi-pity* and so on, towards them⁵. And by this, Walton means that we merely *imagine* ourselves afraid or sad as part of a game of make-believe⁶ in which the story is a prop. Walton compares readers and viewers of fiction to children who *play at* being afraid, say, when their father, acting as a monster, runs after them.

So that what we have always considered to be emotional reactions towards fictional characters or events are for Walton nothing but play-acting: when we are reading Shakespeare's depiction of Juliet's death, we *pretend* to experience sadness; we behave in a way that *imitates* sad behaviour. Walton goes as far as to say that the reader or viewer, in his reaction to fiction, 'is an actor impersonating himself' (1978, 311). This is not to say that we don't get 'caught up' in stories and become 'emotionally involved', but this, says Walton, is make-believe emotion which we mistake for real emotion (1978, 307). Because quasi-fear is an experience that imitates fear, it is *almost* phenomenologically indistinguishable from real fear and the similarity is such that we fail to recognize the difference. For Walton, then, all readers or viewers of fiction are not merely spectators of make-believe or pretence, they themselves play a game of make-believe or pretence. In short, all *consumers of fiction are actors and self-deceivers*⁷.

⁵ Cf. 1978, 308, 312; 1997, 43, 47.

⁶ 'What makes it make-believe that Charles is afraid rather than angry or excited or upset is the fact that his quasi-fear is caused by the belief that make-believable he is in danger' (1978, 311).

⁷ On the other hand, Peter Lamarque's simulation theory, which I shall not discuss in this paper, sees the *author* as a pretence artist: 'Fiction is essentially a form of pretence, though pretence without intended deception, as in a charade or a child's game'; 'The writer of fiction does not assert facts, he pretends to assert facts; he does not describe events, he pretends to describe events; he does not refer to people, he pretends to refer to people. Furthermore, because he only pretends to make assertions in fact he makes neither true nor false assertions' (1981, 332). But here Lamarque distorts what we ordinarily mean by

But Walton is wrong: other than in its restricted pejorative connotation⁸, fiction is not synonymous with (self-)deception or delusion; nor is it the case that spectators or readers by default *pretend to be moved* by fictional characters. There are, of course, instances when we do pretend to be moved *by* fictional characters – say, when reading to a child, I act afraid of the big bad wolf or simulate ecstatic joy as the glass slipper fits Cinderella; or when someone unaffected by an act of cruelty in a film he is watching with friends feigns repulsion in order to seem or feel 'normal': such instances are rightly called *acting, pretending to feel, or simulating emotion*. And such examples of make-believe emotion should highlight the contrast with the way we ordinarily react to fictional characters. As Lamarque rightly notes, our responses to fiction do not correspond to our paradigm of 'make-believe emotions': children who play at being sad or angry or frightened (1991, 165). Walton's children analogy is not a good analogy for art.

In fact, Walton erroneously multiplies processes across the board. Not only does he claim that we are not afraid but merely 'imagine ourselves afraid', he also contends that because artistic objects do not exist, we only 'imagine seeing' them: and so we only 'imagine seeing' the apple in Cezanne's *Still Life with Apple*, or Dracula in the eponymous film. But this too is misguided: we see the apple and Dracula in a very ordinary sense of seeing – only we see them 'in a painting', or 'in a film'. To *imagine seeing something* is, as for pretending to be moved, a much more deliberate and complicated process: 'imagine seeing' is something I might do if I were blind. Analogously, to *imagine seeing an apple in a painting* is much more contrived than *seeing an apple in a painting*⁹; it does not characterise our standard perception of artistic objects.

Literary characters and situations prompt real, full-fledged emotions that often have prolonged, even life-long, impact. Indeed, so *real* was the fear that Hitchcock's *The Birds* spurred in me when I watched it at the age of nine that I know it to be *responsible* for my still-existent ornithophobia. And what of the emotions provoked by Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) which caused so many young men

'pretence', and unwarrantedly limits what we mean by 'description'; the author is not *pretending to describe*, he *is* describing (a scene, a character etc.). Rather than say: 'He *pretends to describe events, people etc.*', Lamarque had better say: 'He *describes pretend-events, people etc.*' or, better, '*fictional events, people etc.*', and even that seems to me superfluous where it is clear that the 'he' is an author.

⁸ As when we say of someone deluding themselves that they're 'living in a fictional world'.

⁹ This misleading multiplication of processes is similar to Lamarque's, in note 7 above.

at the end of the eighteenth century to commit suicide¹⁰? Can we call these 'make-believe'? As Colin Radford writes, our ordinary responses to fictional characters are genuine responses:

We shed real tears for Mercutio. They are not crocodile tears, they are dragged from us and they are not the sort of tears that are produced by cigarette smoke in the theatre Indeed, we may be so appalled at the prospect of what we think is going to happen to a character in a novel or a play that some of us can't go on. We avert the impending tragedy in the only way we can, by closing the book, or leaving the theatre. (1975, 70)

Moreover, Walton – and narrow cognitivists generally – are wrong to think that motivational upshot and existential endorsement are essential to experiencing emotion. Let's start with motivational upshot.

2.1 Emotion & motivational upshot

Granted, we do not send for a policeman when Othello kills Desdemona, as we might if we witnessed our neighbour killing his wife – but if we broaden our range of examples, we realize that not all emotions prompted by *real* events involve an inclination to action. Not all cases of fear, for instance, motivate a desire to escape, or to act: I can be lying in the operating theatre in acute fear of the procedure I am about to undergo, but with no inclination or desire to run away, so conscious am I of the good the operation will do me. Nor do real-life cases of pity *all* motivate a desire to comfort: I may feel genuinely sorry for my friend's untimely death or for Socrates's undeserved death, and yet this emotion does not involve any desire to action¹¹.

Not having motivational upshot is simply a feature of the ways emotions work in some situations and not in others, regardless of whether the situations are fictional or nonfictional. So that Walton's cleavage between reality- and fiction-directed

¹⁰ The 'Werther effect' is the term used to designate these *copycat suicides* which resulted in a ban of the book in several places. As for less elevated reactions: 'A Halloween health warning was today slapped on a horror flick that is so gruesome viewers have fainted. Emergency services have so far attended three cinemas after one man and four women fainted at a torture scene in new movie *Saw III*. One of the women was so traumatised that she needed hospital treatment' (*The London Paper*, 30 October 2006, 7).

¹¹ What is missing in some cases, suggests Robert Yanal, is *opportunity*: 'Motivators need opportunity, and it may be that fiction arouses emotion with motivational force but with little or no opportunity to exercise it. ... I may even wish I could comfort King Lear as he cradles his daughter, a wish that I acknowledge can't be satisfied in reality, but that presses itself nonetheless. Is this so different from a wish to tell a person now dead that one loves him?' (1999, 61).

emotions on the basis of motivational upshot is untenable: an emotion need not motivate us to action to be a *bona fide* emotion. And if motivational upshot does not, in fact, divide the real world from the fictional world, Walton's key argument founders.

It can be said, then, that in his determination to find a solution to an apparent logical problem, Walton misrepresents our *experience* of fiction. As Noel Carroll puts it: 'Walton's theory appears to throw out the phenomenology of the state for the sake of logic' (1990, 73-4) – and for a logic that is unduly restricted by a *narrow* cognitive theory of emotion.

2.2 Emotion and existential commitment

As for claiming that we cannot experience genuine emotions for fictional characters because we do not *believe* they exist (and therefore that they can suffer, love, seek revenge, walk with a limp, lose their eyesight, be miserly or self-sacrificing) – this, I suggest, is to drain the concept of belief of one of its most ordinary and vital uses. There is more to the concept of belief than a propositional attitude toward something we regard as true in the nonfictional world. To say of Desdemona that she is Othello's wife is true, and not to believe that, or to believe she is Iago's wife, is to have seriously misread Shakespeare's play¹².

This ordinary use of the concept of belief, at least, shows that belief does not require existential commitment¹³, but nor does emotion. Indeed, many *common everyday emotional experiences* do not require existence beliefs. Many of our emotions have to do with the nonfactual, such as fearing a ghost or a burglar when

¹² For a compelling argument as to the propriety of calling fictional statements 'true' or 'false', see A.P. Martinich and A. Stroll's excellent *Much Ado About Nonexistence: Fiction and Reference*. The authors argue that the word 'true' has, like other words, various criteria of applicability. The criterion for applying truth to statements in fictional discourse is not the same as the criterion for applying it in nonfictional discourse, but any observation of people's speech about fiction shows that there is a large consensus as to how truth should be applied to fictional statements. The reason we speak of fictional truths (and falsities) is that there are *fictional facts* (here the word 'fictional' is not to be understood as a negator word), which make fictional statements true (or false). Because criteria of applicability are different, there is no problem in holding that fictional facts can both be factual and known to be incompatible with natural facts (2007, 8, 23-29). Martinich and Stroll thereby give philosophical backbone to what many philosophers have rightly maintained, but left unargued; e.g. Harold Skulsky: 'The claim that Becky Sharp finally married William Dobbin is subject to refutation (without incongruity) by the warranted counterclaim that in Chapter 67 of the *novel*, Thackeray arranges matters otherwise' (1980, 6).

¹³ This ordinary use of believing *that*; but believing *in* (which is often synonymous with faith or trust, and can also denote *blind* faith) also does not require existential commitment; e.g. 'I believe in an afterlife', 'I believe in (his) love', 'I believe in democracy'. For a discussion of the polysemy of belief, see Moyal-Sharrock (2005), 188f.

none is there; or fearing a forecast earthquake that does not occur. For his theory to work, however, Walton claims it is not necessary that we believe in the *actual* existence of the object of our emotion, believing in its *possible* existence will do. But, in response to Walton, there are some emotionally stimulating fantasies or daydreams that do not presuppose beliefs in the actuality *or possibility* of their content: e.g. 'Suppose I were immortal / invincible / irresistible / Midas / endowed with magical powers that would bring my father back to life ...'¹⁴. Although all of these nonfictional fantasies can elicit emotion, they are – none of them – grounded on belief or even half-belief, and have no *possibility* ground to stand on.

We can then go on to ask, with B. J. Rosebury, whether such fantasies might not provide a model for an explanation of our responses to fiction which would avoid raising the question of belief at all, and thus circumvent the paradox (*ibid.*); but our answer would have to be: not quite. For though such fantasies, by rendering belief unnecessary, render both Walton's make-believe theory and narrow cognitivism otiose, we still have to contend with *broad* cognitivism.

3. Peter Lamarque: not beliefs, but *thoughts*

Broad cognitivism in the form, mainly, of Peter Lamarque's thought theory¹⁵ – is characteristic of the second type of assault on the paradox, that which consists in rejecting the idea that emotions require *belief* in the existence or possibility of their object, and regarding *thought* as sufficient to stimulate emotion: 'we can be frightened by the thought of something without believing that there is anything real corresponding to the content of the thought. At most we must simply believe that the thought is frightening' (1981, 330).

With thought theory, then, we are still within the dictates of cognitive theory, but the requirements are not as stringent. Here, belief is not necessary for emotion; it is, as it were, the thought that counts: 'the fear and pity we feel for fictions are in fact directed at thoughts in our minds', and not at the characters themselves; 'when we fear Othello or pity Desdemona our fears and tears are directed at thought-contents'¹⁶.

¹⁴ B. J. Rosebury first suggested these emotionally stimulating fantasies (1979, 128) be used as an argument against the cognitive theory of emotion.

¹⁵ Cf. especially Lamarque (1981).

¹⁶ (1981, 330; 329; 331). Lamarque admits as thoughts 'everything we might consider as mental contents, including mental images, imaginings, fantasies, suppositions, and all that Descartes called "ideas"' (1981, 329).

What horrifies us in the Dracula movie, for example, is the content of our thoughts 'that Dracula might exist and do these terrible things' (Carroll 1987, 56).

So that where, with Walton, we had lost all full-fledged emotions towards fictional characters and events; with Lamarque, we lose the characters and events themselves as objects of our full-fledged emotions. But this, I suggest, is where the thought theory collapses before it even gets off the ground, for it *is* towards characters and events in fiction that readers and viewers speak of having emotions, not towards thoughts. Our emotions are directed at characters embedded in lived situations, not at thoughts or propositions in our minds¹⁷. As Robert Yanal rightly objects: 'It is one thing to shudder over an abstract thought, it is another to shudder when 'Mrs Bates' comes into the bathroom in *Psycho*' (1999, 38).

3.1 *Contra* Lamarque: art is *not* thought

Moreover, what Lamarque must see is that if a thought can fill us with pity, it cannot do so *ex nihilo*; a thought always occurs in a context, and it is the context that determines whether the thought can fill us with pity or not. If the mere thought: 'Anna Karenina is suicidal' could inspire pity, why bother writing novels? Why not dispense with fiction altogether and merely articulate thoughts? Lamarque foresees this objection by speaking of a requirement of *vividness* for the thought to evoke emotion¹⁸. But what gives a thought its vividness if not the context in which it occurs – that is, the author's depiction?¹⁹

On a continuum of vividness, the thought 'Anna Karenina is suicidal' – uttered independently of having read or heard about the novel (or without any reference to a real person of our acquaintance named Anna Karenina) – will be at point zero, and therefore so will its emotion-inducing capacity. Add a little more depiction, and the emotion will also increase. But no thought or summary or paraphrase of a novel – however vivid – can vie in emotional impact with the novel itself. This is a

¹⁷ Michael Weston's stance is close to thought theory; he takes the object of our emotions toward fiction to be 'a conception of life' (1975, 85-6). So that our emotions are not addressed to the fictional character and situations, but to certain truths or ideas about life which the narrative evokes.

¹⁸ 'The propensity of a thought to be frightening is likely to increase in relation to the level of reflection or imaginative involvement that is directed to it. There are two points here: thoughts can differ among themselves with respect to *vividness* and our reflection on thoughts can be graded with respect to *involvement*' (1981, 330).

¹⁹ Lamarque concedes that 'there must be both a *causal* and a *content-based* connection between the thoughts in our minds and the sentences and descriptions in the fiction' (1981, 334), but he does nothing to explicate these connections or say how the thought-contents are 'identifiable through descriptions derived in suitable ways from the propositional contents of fictional sentences' (1981, 335).

commonplace, which highlights the essentiality of *form* in literature. F. R. Leavis reminds us of it with regard to his own summarizing:

My summary has, as of course any summary of theme and significance in *Anna Karenina* must have, an effect of grossness from which one shrinks. The actual creative presentment is *infinitely subtle*, and comes as the upshot of an *immense deal of immediately relevant drama and suggestion* in the foregoing mass of the book. (1967, 28; my emphasis)

And whatever 'causal connection' might exist between our thoughts and the sentences and descriptions in the fiction (Lamarque *op.cit*), if our emotions are provoked by those *intermediary* thoughts, they are not the emotions prompted by the work itself, directly and fully. What Lamarque fails to see is that literature is not philosophy; literature does not essentially operate *via thoughts*, but through the 'immense deal of immediately relevant drama and suggestion in the foregoing mass of the book' – only *that* vividness can prompt the kind of emotion felt by readers of the novel. So that if the *vividness* is essential to the production of the emotion, the thought is *not* enough²⁰; it is *not what counts*. Indeed, it might be asked why the thought is even necessary. What Lamarque summarily calls 'vividness' is the power of literary depiction, not the power of thought.

3.2 Inseparability of form and content

The power of literary depiction, or what Leavis often refers to as 'dramatic presentation' or 'creative presentment' (e.g. 1967, 18, 28), consists in the *inseparable* conjunction of form and content – that is, of *how* the work of art expresses and *what* it expresses. The meaning (of a novel or in a novel) cannot be prized apart from its form because the formal properties of the novel essentially contribute to its meaning. Try paraphrasing Anna's love, or Shylock's feeling of alienation, or Iago's *ressentiment*. The kind of vividness, without which Lamarque's theory dries up and withers, is not to be found in a thought sparked in the reader by a work of fiction, or even in the very sentences of the work, but in the way those very sentences are presented (e.g. as dialogue, narrative, description, meditation, stream of consciousness), and in the literary devices (e.g. metaphor, symbolism, vocabulary,

²⁰ Which is perhaps why Lamarque adds – to no avail, in my view – that 'it is often not so much single thoughts that are frightening ... as thought clusters' (1981, 330).

syntax, tone, cadence, silence) and other elements (e.g. irony, suggestion, psychological acuity, action, timing, juxtaposition, tension, mood, plot), that bolster (e.g. contextualize, highlight, compound, characterize, enliven) them²¹, intricately constituting what D.H. Lawrence calls the novel's 'subtle interrelatedness' (1936, 528).

The depiction itself is *essential* to our being moved by fictional characters and situations. As Howard Mounce points out, whether or not a character moves us depends on its place in the fiction: we are not simply *told* that Anna is suffering; she is *portrayed* as suffering; and it is the detail and manner of her portrayal within the novel that are crucial to our emotional experience (1980, 191). How we respond to Macbeth's realization of what he has done is intimately linked to how he, Lady Macbeth, other characters and events, have been depicted up to that realization, as well as to how he expresses that realization. Context – and, in the case of literature, this largely comprises *form* – is of vital importance; thought is *not* enough.

A related attempt to make sense of the alleged paradox of fiction is to suggest that the objects of our emotions do, in some qualified or attenuated sense, exist – e.g. by claiming, as Barrie Paskins does, that the objects of our emotions are not the characters and situations depicted, but their real life analogues: we pity real life people *in the same bind* as those depicted (1977). But here again, the phenomenology of our experience of fiction is overlooked: readers speak of the characters themselves, not people like them, as the objects of their emotion. Of course, there are similarities between Juliet's love and any woman's love, but how many women resemble Juliet in circumstance, intensity and eloquence? And how many people do we know *in the same situation*, or even one similar, to that of Oedipus or Gregor Samsa or Gulliver? As D.Z. Phillips argues, if literary depictions simply served to remind us of similar scenes in real life, we could be reminded of them in other, more economical ways, making works of literature superfluous (1996, 140).

It is not the *thought* of Anna Karenina jumping under the train that is responsible for the reader's emotion, but Tolstoy's *rendering* of that action in the

²¹ Occasionally, dialogue, discussion, or thought might, as Leavis says about a passage in *St Mawr*, 'in a wholly dramatic way, bring to the point of explicitness the essential work of implicit definition that has been done by image, action and symbolic presentation' (1955, 243), but note that 'the affirmation *merely* brings to explicitness what [Lawrence's] art has affirmed pervasively and cumulatively' (256; my emphasis), and that such occasions are rare, and certainly not essential to the deployment and communication of, say, any conceptual, emotional, moral or Existential point. Again, about a passage in

context of his rendering of her life. And this rendering *is* the novel, in all its subtle interrelatedness. Indeed, as we shall now see, no thought at all is necessary to prompt *some* emotions, so that even broad cognitivism can be rejected.

4. Noncognitivism: emotions do not require beliefs or thoughts

Noncognitivism rejects the supposition that every emotion must be accompanied by a propositional or a cognitive attitude of any kind – neither belief nor thought are, on this view, a necessary condition for emotion. Jinhee Choi's noncognitivist approach to fiction-directed emotion is grounded on instances of what he calls: 'cognitively impenetrable emotions' (2003, 149), emotions that *cannot* be prompted by cognition²². These include emotions evoked by the style of a work as well as perception-based emotions.

It is generally agreed that the formal features of an artwork are an integral part of our experience of that work – try turning off the sound in a Hitchcock film, and see how much of that is responsible for arousing anxiety – and they affect us directly, nonpropositionally, and so noncognitively. As Yanal makes clear about cinematic montage: it is nonsentential, nonlinguistic, and we grasp it that way; that is, we do not mentally 'translate' the images of the montage into propositions in order to stimulate emotion' (1999, 117). The same goes for perception-based emotions – emotions that are more involved with the perception of an object than with its significance or relevance (e.g. we are startled at the mere appearance or size of monsters in film before we find out what it is they do; e.g. drink people's blood).

And so, in response to Radford, there are essentially different ways, not only a paradigmatic way, of feeling, and our not feeling in the paradigmatic way does not mean that it is irrational or incoherent that we should feel. Philosophers who think there is only one right way to react emotionally and that any other is substandard or incoherent, are basing their view on too restricted a diet of examples of the different manifestations of emotion. Why should sophisticated, cognitive emotions be the benchmark against which we measure whether something is or is not an emotion? And why have fiction-based emotional responses been excluded from our diet of

Women in Love: its 'local explicitness *merely* picks up what has been done in drama, imagery, and poetic organization' (1955, 175; my emphasis).

²² That is: 'the transformation of information into a propositional form that is accessible to thoughts and beliefs' (Choi 2003, 149).

examples; or considered as a deviant, rather than a fundamental, part of our emotional repertoire?

5. Emotions in context

The characteristics of our emotions – intensity, motivational upshot, etc. – are dictated by the occasion or context, not by whether their object is real or imaginary. And so rather than make a vertical separation between emotions felt towards people and those towards fictional characters, I propose we go horizontal: track *all* emotions on a continuum going from *nil* cognitivity, existential commitment and motivational upshot to *sophisticated* cognitivity, existential commitment and motivational upshot. The same emotion, say fear, can, *or not*, be due to cognitive or propositional representation, involve existential commitment and action: I can be afraid *of* Dracula's sudden appearance on the screen (noncognitive) or *because* I believe the dentist will hurt me (cognitive); I can be afraid though I know Dracula does not exist or because I believe there is a burglar in the next room; I can be afraid and stay put, or be afraid and run. A continuum would eliminate the implausible discontinuity between our reactions towards fiction and our reactions towards real people and events – eliminating a difference *in kind* between the pity we feel for Anna Karenina and the pity we feel for someone we know; as well as any necessary difference in degree. I can feel more pity for a very dear friend than I do for Anna Karenina, but I can also feel *less* pity for a real person than I do for Anna:

It is not improbable – maybe even likely – that a person reading Tolstoy's novel will feel more intensely for Anna Karenina (whom he takes to be fictional) than for a real woman whose plight resembles Anna's and which he has read about in the morning's paper. (Yanal 1999, 96)

I feel King Lear or Shylock or Willy Loman much closer to me than most *real* people I know. They step off the page and into my life and, when described by great writers, I feel closer even to some minor characters than to my postman, whose existence I don't doubt. I feel more for the death of Desdemona, who I know does not exist, than for the death of my neighbour's sister who does, because I *know* Desdemona far better: I know her psychology, her situation, her feelings; I am made to share her story and live it with her. The *story* here – but also, the way it is related:

as a '*structured representation*'²³ – are essential. If a travelling salesman came to my house and recounted his problems to me, I would not feel for him as I do for Willy Loman simply because the salesman's recounting of his story cannot vie with Arthur Miller's psychologically eloquent, sensitive and powerful rendering of a life through the subtle interrelatedness of dialogue, metaphor, symbolism, irony etc. The contrast drawn by Leavis in *The Living Principle* is between 'enacting' and 'telling'; between depicting something so that it seems 'before our eyes' or 'done', and something 'merely told' about or related (1975, 146-8).

The impact of the literary medium on the *quality* of the emotion experienced should not be lost sight of. My husband recounts his experience in a battlefield during the Vietnam war where his emotion reached a peak of *intensity* he had never before experienced, but subsequently reading Tolstoy's rendering of warfare in *War and Peace* and in *The Sebastopol Sketches* prompted in him a *depth* of emotion about combat, which he had never before experienced. The lived emotion had been an utterly animal emotion, whereas 'reliving Vietnam with Tolstoy' spurred a deeper, more reflective emotion – one with a dense, cognitive layering – informed by the genius of a great creative writer. Both, however, were emotions.

Not only does literature provoke genuine emotion, great literature prompts some of the finest, richest emotions we will ever experience. Not many of us experience the intensity of love Juliet and Romeo feel for each other, and for those who do, it is hardly also experienced in the kind of enlightening psychological and poetical atmosphere equivalent to that of Shakespeare's play. As Dammann aptly puts it: 'We can be moved by fictional events, by imaginary events, and by real events, but it is for the first of these to shed light on the other two, not the other way round' (1992, 20). The penetration of a great creative genius is such that life learns from fiction.

What Aristotle says about tragedy – that it promotes understanding or cognition – can be said of all great fiction. And tragedy as well as great fiction do this only inasmuch as a *story* (or *plot*, as Aristotle had it) is essential to them. As Amelie Rorty writes: 'While there is sorrow, grief, loss, pain in life, there is *tragedy* only when the actions and events that compose a life are organized into a story, a structured representation of that life' (1992, 3-4; my emphasis). It is this *structured representation*, a representation through an artistic medium, that affects our emotions

²³ Cf. Amelie Rorty passage below.

in such a way that an exceptional kind of understanding – one rarely experienced without the mediation of literature – takes place. As Dammann remarks: 'Fiction moves us because, not in spite of, the fact that it is fiction' (1992, 20).

Talk here of understanding and, specifically, of 'cognition' should not be confused with cognitivism or with thought theory. I am not saying that the emotions require cognitive activity to occur, but that literature imparts greater understanding or, in a broad sense: cognition. I use the term 'cognition' half-heartedly because, while I *do* want to suggest that what we reap from great literature is a robust kind of understanding which generates new beliefs, I do not want to suggest that it is constituted by, or generates, new justified true beliefs. I remain mindful of Frank Cioffi's resistance to any alliance of literature with knowledge: there are, he reminds me, differences between, say, learning German verbs and reading a novel; and in our reaching out for a work of literature, 'it is the experience itself and not its epistemic aftermath that we seek and cherish' (personal communication). Yet, as I shall argue below, one of the most important pleasures we obtain from great literary works is that of enhanced understanding – what Aristotle describes as a kind of *cognitive pleasure*²⁴. *Contra* Lamarque, literature cannot be reduced to thought, but it is of course conducive to thought. Perhaps Leavis's 'The tale itself *is* the thought' (1976, 121) both renders the indispensability of form to the content of literature, whilst also indicating the kind of 'thought' here in question.

6 Literature and Concept-Formation

Where lived experience will often produce raw emotion, the emotion generated by a great creative work will be more reflective, more refined and nuanced. This is not to say that lived experience *cannot* produce pondered emotion, but a great creative writer will show us and our human condition to ourselves with infinitely greater lucidity than we are capable of. For all the horror that documentaries and history books on the Holocaust convey, it is through Kafka that I came to fathom its Existential resonances. Through works like *The Trial*, *The Judgment*, *In the Penal Colony*, the concepts of absurdity, alienation, contingency and arbitrariness took

²⁴ In *Poetics* IV; more on this below. The expression 'cognitive pleasure' is commonly used by Aristotelian scholars to denote the delight experienced in the understanding or insight Aristotle believes we get from art. The word 'cognitive' should be understood here in the general sense of 'learning – gathering the meaning of things' and I shall henceforth italicize the words 'cognitive' and 'cognition' when thus using them so as to distinguish this use from their narrower association with propositional knowledge.

shape for me, and shed their desolate light – but a light nevertheless – on gas chambers, on mass and random killing, on human cruelty and indifference. Through Kafka, the horror became articulate.

Similarly, only through literature – indeed, years of focused reading of poetry and fiction – was I initiated into the enigmatic concept of *ennui*. It is not, however, only sophisticated or esoteric concepts that literature helps us acquire and deepen, but mostly ordinary ones: love, war, injustice, bureaucracy, mental illness, jealousy. We discover ourselves and our world through experience, yes, but *in words*; and what better words than those of literature? As Leavis writes:

Nothing important can really be said simply – simply *and* safely; and by 'safely' I mean to ensure that the whole intuited apprehension striving to find itself, to discover what it is in words, is duly served, and not thwarted. It takes a context, often a subtly and potently creative one, to do that. (1976, 122)

Literature is an inestimable source of understanding, but not of the kind that can be meaningfully conveyed in propositions or thoughts. Literature exemplifies what Martha Nussbaum calls 'the ethical relevance of circumstances' (1990, 37), and more generally I would say, their *cognitive* relevance.

Both Aristotle and Leavis regard literature as a civilizing tool. It procures an enhanced understanding of, *inter alia*, emotions. It does this, not only by the quality of its depiction, but also by the range or quantity of depicted experiences²⁵ which would otherwise remain unknown to readers. Not only can reading Stendhal and Tolstoy take us to different climes, it can take us to different times, and it can do so through the art of two of the most perspicacious individuals ever to have lived. This unrivalled aptitude of literature to make available to us a range and depth of concept-formative and civilizing experiences unavailable to us in life is part of the force of D.H. Lawrence's claim that the novel is one of humanity's greatest discoveries – greater than Galileo's telescope or Marconi's wireless (1968, 416).

Breadth, depth and intensity of emotions in great works of art profoundly colour our lives such that to speak of 'make-believe' is idly derogatory. Without literature, our experience of *life* is reduced. Experiences provided through great

²⁵ For Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the consciousness of our human contingency makes the present override the future, and the quantity of experiences override their quality (cf. J. O'Brien translation, Penguin 1981, pp. 59-62).

works of art become a part of our emotional make-up as much as our personal experiences do. Much of the rich texture of our emotional range results from these literary experiences. Acquiring great literature is the ultimate step in acquiring language; our own emotions will find clearer and deeper articulation for it. Art is a major interpersonal channel for enculturation and concept-formation; in grasping through literature what it is to love or hurt or hate, something is being done to us which consolidates our experiences in our culture.

7 Emotions and Literature

There are several strands to the relationship between literature and emotions. The two principal ones are literature's aptitude to make us *experience* emotions, and its related aptitude to *enlighten* us about them. I agree with Jenefer Robinson that great literature²⁶ depicts emotions better than anything else can; and therefore, that great literature promotes our understanding of emotions:

... if we really want to understand emotions in all their uniqueness and individuality, if we want to follow the progress of an emotion process as it unfolds, if we want to understand how different elements of the process feed into one another and interact, and how the streams of emotional life blend and flow into one another, then we would do better to stay away from the generalizations of philosophers and psychologists, and turn instead to the detailed studies of emotion that we find in great literature. (2005, 99)

Moreover, Robinson argues that great literary works 'need to be experienced emotionally if they are to be properly understood'; 'learning from a novel is a matter of responding to it emotionally' (2005, 102, 192). So that the education we receive in reading the novel consists 'not just in the fact that it may eventually lead to new beliefs, but also in *how* it does so' (2005, 157); and exactly how it does so, Robinson claims, is by *controlling* or *taming* the emotions. This is where we part company.

In fact, Robinson is taking away with one hand what she gives with the other: 'without appropriate emotional responses, some novels simply *cannot* be adequately

²⁶ By 'great literature', Robinson has in mind – and I concur – the kind of morally serious, realistic works cited by F.R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* (Chatto & Windus, 1960). For 'not all novels invite ... serious sustained emotional attention. There are bad novels that try to teach us something and fail, there are genre novels that merely aim to entertain, and there are novels that are more like intellectual puzzles or games' (2005, 159). In the 'serious' category, I would, however, also include nonrealistic works such as those of Kafka and Borges.

understood' (2005, 107); but on the other hand: the formal features of a work help keep the emotions at bay. On Robinson's view, literature, by the mere fact of being literature and not life, has a dampening effect on the emotions, on our involvement in the novel (2005, 203) but, more pointedly, a literary work's formal devices (use of imagery, sentence structure etc.) act as 'coping mechanisms' or defence mechanisms (e.g. *avoidance or distancing, denial, intellectualization or pointing to a moral*), enabling us to *cope* with troubling content:

Reading literature always has the potential for creating anxiety or uncertainty, but literature, unlike life, often provides us with the coping strategies that we need to deal with its deep and possibly troubling content. The formal or structural devices in a novel allow us to cope with its themes and ultimately to derive pleasure from the very fact that we have successfully coped with a piece of reality. (2005, 219)

So that, on Robinson's view, literature throws a security blanket on our emotions, and this explains why we are not dejected by a Shakespearian sonnet on death but get pleasure from it: 'the poem has enabled us to cope emotionally with the reality of death' (2005, 226) and this gives us pleasure. It seems then that Robinson is trying to create a gap between fiction and the emotions – to produce an unnecessary security blanket between the reader and his literature-prompted emotions. But what is the point of that? The point is that it furnishes Robinson with a way of resolving the paradox of tragedy: the distancing explains why people enjoy tragedies despite their often bloody and macabre subject-matter. Note that the pleasure envisaged here by Robinson is an exclusively psychological pleasure, not an aesthetic or *cognitive* one.

The problem with Robinson's view is that this psychological pleasure-as-relief is too specialized to fit into a more general account of the pleasure we get from literature. Not all fictional situations that prompt pleasure are troubling: we get pleasure from the union of Jane Eyre and Rochester because of its *affirming* power; and in such cases the pleasure cannot be due to our *coping* with a painful emotion²⁷. Moreover, we get pleasure from situations that are not emotional: say, the revelation of Gwendolyn's character through George Eliot's initial *physical* description of her in

²⁷ If, in spite of Robinson's unilateral discussion of troubling content, she means distancing to apply also to emotions spurred by non-troubling content, then one must wonder why a coping mechanism is needed at all. Who would not want to share, fully, Wordsworth's burst of joy in his encounter with the daffodils ('I wandered lonely as a cloud...')?

Daniel Deronda; or from Birkin's few remarks on an African statuette, in *Women in Love* – remarks that kindle and engage our own reflexion on the question of the universality of art. No need for coping mechanisms here, no sense of having triumphed over painful material (2005, 226), and yet fictional pleasure is at its highest. The pleasure – or even an important part of the pleasure – literature procures cannot be due to our ability to cope with the painful emotions it depicts if that pleasure can occur independently of those painful emotions and, indeed, independently of any depicted emotion. And so Robinson would need an explanation different from that of successful coping to account for the pleasure we get from nonpainful material.

Instead, I suggest that the pleasure we experience in all the cases mentioned above – Shakespeare's sonnet, Eliot's character description, Lawrence's aesthetic passage – is an *aesthetico-cognitive* one. A pleasure resulting from our *enhanced understanding* of the world, of our human condition, of a concept etc. through its *artistic presentation*. Whether the fictional representation be pleasant or painful, its artistic presentation – if successful – will always prompt *cognitive pleasure*: the pleasure that comes from the satisfaction of enhanced understanding. This is Aristotle's message. Literature does not act as a coping but as a *cognitive* mechanism; the pleasure we experience is not from having escaped, but from having confronted and understood:

... we take pleasure in contemplating the most precise images of things whose sight in itself causes us pain ... the explanation lies in the fact that to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind ...; the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning – gathering the meaning of things ... (*Poetics* IV, 1148b11-16)

Contra Robinson, I suggest form is here, not to distance us, but to take us in, to absorb or engage us. Literature both evokes and provokes the emotions. When reading a novel, we are not victims of our emotions, as Robinson would have it; we want to have them. Robinson, it seems, shares a Platonist suspicion of the emotions, where these need to be controlled, tamed, lest they overwhelm us and wreak damage. The crucial pleasure we get from literature is not due to its having helped us suppress or cope with our emotions, but to its having helped us understand them (as it does

also nonemotional concepts) by *revealing* them – through its unique interrelatedness of form and content – clarified and *cognitively* enhanced. And by *revealing* an emotion, I mean that literature (a) *perspicuously presents* the emotion, played out in particular, textured circumstances; and (b) through this dramatic presentation uncovers *some of the nature (or concept) of that emotion*, thereby prompting *cognitive pleasure* which signals (c) our enhanced grasp of that emotion. *Cognitive pleasure* is a multi-faceted pleasure and, at its most sophisticated, results not only from the grasp of meaning, but from our awareness and admiration of, the inextricable interplay – indeed, interdependency – between that meaning and the form that conveys it.

Aristotle, not Plato, is to be trusted here. Aristotle does not regard the emotions as intrinsically harmful. Relatedly, note that the exact meaning of *catharsis* is under debate; its traditional interpretation as psychological purgation (of undesirable emotion) or as moral purification has been challenged by philosophers who see it as related to intellectual clarification. As Leon Golden writes, for Aristotle, 'the essential pleasure of art is an intellectual one derived from learning about human existence through the medium of art' (1973, 476). My disagreement with Jenefer Robinson may be profitably formulated in terms of our discrepant interpretations of *catharsis*. Unlike Robinson, I do not take the pleasure we get from literature as resulting from having successfully coped with an emotion, but – as *Poetics* IV makes clear – from seeing and understanding something as never before. Herein, also, lies the solution to the paradox of tragedy.

Whereas Jenefer Robinson suggests that form acts as a security blanket, I want to stress that form is essential to the revelatory nature (and therefore to the concept-formative impact) of literature. The *perspicuous presentations* that are great literature generate a more perspicuous understanding of the concepts presented, and this is signalled and encouraged by our *cognitive pleasure*²⁸. I call it *cognitive pleasure*, leaving the term '*aesthetic pleasure*' to qualify the more general satisfaction afforded by the disinterested appreciation of form not invested by content²⁹ (e.g. that

²⁸ *Cognitive pleasure* is not exclusively generated by great literature – understanding a pun, a witty remark or an ironical act outside of fictional contexts will also generate it; nor, of course, is it the only kind of pleasure afforded by literature.

²⁹ Unlike Scruton, for whom aesthetic pleasure is constitutively *cognitive* (cf. for example *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen, 1979), 72ff.

of a beautiful face or the smoothness of marble). In *cognitive pleasure*, aesthetic form is internally linked to the occurrence of a *cognitive* experience.

8 Conclusion

As we have seen, emotion is not conceptually linked to existential commitment: we have emotional responses to dead people and past events as well as to impossible situations, and these can be more intense and motivational than our emotional responses to real people and actual situations. *Really* feeling for Anna Karenina does not result in irrationality or paradox. Pitying Anna Karenina is not only essential to understanding Tolstoy's novel and therefore to a better understanding of ourselves and our emotions, it is also *pace* Radford, the most rational, consistent attitude we could have towards her.

Attempting to reduce fiction to thought, as Lamarque does, amounts to reducing it to paraphrase, and that leads to the view that literature is trivial or meaningless. Attempting to reduce our emotions for fictional characters to *quasi*-emotions – that is, to contend that we cannot rationally pity Anna Karenina or cry for Romeo – is to suck the very life out of what we mean when we say 'I pity ...' and to demote one of our most intensely emotional experiences to the shedding of crocodile tears. Walton's claim that our emotional responses to fictional characters is only make-believe comes from his misreading the nature of our phenomenological responses to these characters, and amounts to his demeaning and minimizing the invaluable role of literature in our lives. It is a poor account of literature that sees it as playing second fiddle to daily life in the expression and provocation of emotion, but it is a downright mediocre one that sees it as no player at all.

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