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## Feeling from the Perspective of the Empirical Study of Literature<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Feeling: an Empirical Approach

The main theme in this article is the place of feeling in literary response – what do readers feel, when do they feel it, and what difference does it make. The context will be empirical research on literary reading – the project of investigating actual readers and their readings of literary texts. So the article represents an invitation to consider the study of reader's feelings and how these have been examined empirically.

As empirical study is not well understood, I should say at the outset that empirical scholars draw both on cultural theories and theories of narrative, textual stylistics and structure that have been developed within mainstream scholarship, and on understanding of psychological processes developed by scholars of cognition, emotion, and neuropsychology. The hypotheses about reading that are investigated by empirical methods often depend on such prior theorizing. At the same time, the empirical scholar is unwilling to remain content with text theories or readings of literary texts that limit themselves to purely hypothetical conclusions, such as claims about how all »competent« readers will necessarily construe a particular text or narrative feature. Readers come to their chosen texts with many different competencies, some of which have yet to be investigated with the thoroughness they deserve, and some of which remain outside the purview of approaches (such as Culler 1975, Smith 1988, or Rabinowitz 1998) that presuppose all literary reading is dependent on the acquisition of prior conventions. While empirical study depends on theory, in practice it can illuminate methods and outcomes of reading that we may know little about, and that can relocate our understanding of reading to include the common reader (a much neglected figure in the recent history of our discipline). Empirical study can thus help us assess the validity of theoretical claims, some of which may currently be

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rejected or out of fashion. In particular, several empirical studies, as I will show, have suggested that feeling provides the central element of readers' responses to literature, and that it is in the processes of feeling that we are likely to locate the phenomena of literariness.<sup>2</sup>

So, what does feeling in response to reading look like? I begin with one example. In one of our empirical studies we invited readers to respond to the first few lines of a poem by Coleridge, »The Nightingale«, by selecting a passage they found striking. One reader chose the phrase: »rest on this old mossy bridge«. After identifying this phrase the reader commented on how it reflected her idea of England; then she remarked: »Something beautiful and old and mossy, and it gives me the idea of being sort of isolated and alone and alienated, where very very few people ever come by and it's very quiet«. The response is undramatic – like the opening of the poem – but it raises some interesting questions about the role of feeling during reading.

While the reader doesn't explicitly mention feeling, it seems clear that the idea of being »isolated and alone and alienated« is attended by feeling: the successive terms intensify the state from descriptive (»isolated«) to experiential (»alienated«), that is, the terms become more negatively valenced; the reader's repeated »very very« also indicates a felt investment in her reading. While the opening lines of the poem from which the reader is quoting seem neutral in tone or mildly positive, this reader's response is noticeably divergent in tone in the negative stance that emerges while contemplating the description of the mossy bridge. It is as though the reader has brought to the reading situation a prior experience of alienation which this line of the poem has triggered, although she is not aware of this, attributing her response to the poem (»it gives me the idea of«). The feeling also seems to have located the reader at the deictic centre offered by the poem (»this bridge«): having evoked the place by embellishing the poet's words (»beautiful and old and mossy«), she suggests that few people »come by« (»come« also makes the bridge the perceptual centre) and that »it's very quiet«, showing that she has an enlivened feeling of its suggested atmosphere.

Are the feelings shown by this reader relevant to reading the poem? Do they distract from or enhance her understanding? While empirical study of readers' feelings has made some headway in the last few years, some central questions remain to be considered. What is happening when a reader experiences a feeling while reading a literary text? Is the feeling a byproduct of the process of comprehension? Is it a response to a specific trigger in the text? And, if so, is the reader registering some aspect of the text through feeling, or is she reliving some feeling from her life outside the text? Does feeling in response to a text conflict

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed introductions to empirical studies, see Miall, *Literary Reading* (2006a) and Miall, »Empirical« (2006b). For a methodological primer, see van Peer, Hakemulder, and Zyngier (2007).





with the stance of aesthetic disinterest? If we understood these issues better, we could ask whether feeling is important to the experience of literary reading, and to what extent feeling contributes to understanding, or to that more deliberate activity we call interpretation.

Scholars studying reading empirically have sometimes claimed that their work contributes to a larger understanding of feeling, but empirical study, not surprisingly, has tended to employ the concepts of feeling or emotion available from the current psychological, philosophical, or (more rarely) critical literature.<sup>3</sup> Feeling has generally been conceptualized in standard ways as a state or epiphenomenon, enriching understanding but not undergirding it; and feeling tends to be characterized as a response to the unexpected, an interruption of cognitive functioning that depends on a prior cognitive appraisal (Hogan 2003a, 140–141, 144). There has been less attention to what may potentially be different about feeling, what processes it may uniquely allow that contribute to making literary reading a distinctive experience with its own inherent laws. In this article I refer to some of the salient discussions that touch on this issue in philosophy, psychology, neuropsychology, and empirical literary studies, but as I do so I will propose a set of processes that appear to be inherent to feeling as it is manifested during literary reading, some of which have so far received little attention.

Critical approaches of the last few decades have not been hospitable to discussions of readers' feelings. While the focus of some critics on feeling has made an impact on the field, such as the psychoanalytic approaches of Holland (1975) and Bleich (1975), or Lacan, or Barthes's celebratory account of reading as *plaisir* or *jouissance* (1975), in general little substantial work has built on these approaches that would account for the role of feelings for the ordinary reader, what Noël Carroll (1997) has called the »garden-variety« emotions that we experience daily. Thus it has been possible, for example, for a recent and innovative book, Keith Opdahl's *Emotion as Meaning* (2002), largely to overlook poststructuralist theory and develop an account of reading based on insights from much older sources such as Wordsworth, T. S. Eliot, and early twentieth-century phenomenology. A complaint that Jane P. Tompkins made in 1977, that critics were ignoring personal feelings during reading, is still largely valid – with the exception that empirical scholars of reading have recently taken important steps towards exploring and beginning to theorize this domain.

Empirical studies so far remains the main site for systematic examination of readers' feelings. It must be emphasized that here we are considering the feelings

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<sup>3</sup> It should be mentioned that there is little agreement in this literature on how to define and differentiate feelings and emotions. The terms will be used somewhat interchangeably in this essay. However, Damasio (1999) provides the basis for a distinction between feeling as a mental event (which is what normally occurs during reading) in contrast to the visible, bodily signals of emotion (which occurs less often).





of ordinary readers – or, what often stands in for the ordinary reader in many studies, the undergraduate student who is frequently our experimental participant. One reason for wishing to nurture empirical studies is that, apart from questionnaire surveys, there has been little study of the role and place of reading in the culture outside the academy, despite the obvious fact noted by Robert De Beaugrande (1985) that »Ordinary readers vastly outnumber expert readers in most societies (certainly in America), and deserve to be taken into account in any theory of literary communication« (16). While the study of readers in history has been an active field for several decades (e.g., Rose 2001; Long 2003), the most important resource for developing a systematic understanding of reading, the contemporary reader, has been almost entirely overlooked in mainstream literary studies. But within this field, study of the feelings of readers, as I will suggest, appears a promising avenue for future research, since we currently have rather little reliable information in this domain.

## 2. A Constructive Role for Feeling

Thus literary critics looking to the research literature on emotion and feeling would, until recently, have not found it helpful in generating insights about literary reading. But as I will show, important developments in the field suggest that this may be about to change. Among the »new look« aspects of the psychology and philosophy of emotion, here are some of the features that suggest a basis for insights into literary response. First, our feelings are active and continuous; second, feeling appears to offer a separate, third mode of knowing alongside cognition and imagery; third, that whatever primary appraisal occurs is affective; fourth, that emotion has its own structural system from bodily aspects to prototypes; fifth, that feeling alerts us to issues of self-relevance; and sixth, that emotion is an important vehicle of our cultural embeddedness and the narratives by which culture structures our understanding. I briefly outline each of these aspects in turn.

While the older account of emotions as reactions to unexpected stimuli, the »interrupt« view, cannot be entirely rejected – as when a dangerous snake suddenly obstructs my path – as a model of emotion in general it is clearly too limited. Rather than viewing emotions as passive responses to external or interoceptive (i.e., internal, bodily) stimuli, emotions can be conceptualized as continuous and active. Through our current feeling state we actively place ourselves in an environment where we expect particular experiences, including further or different feelings. It is not usually the case that feelings are passively switched on or off by passing stimuli; we have an important degree of control over them (Forgas/Ciarrochi/Moylan 2000). Typical of such conditions is the feeling with which we choose a literary text and begin to read it. At the basis of this approach





is the realization that emotion and consciousness are inseparable, as Damasio (1999, 16) argues, and that »we continuously have emotional feelings« (285). A similar account is offered by Jenefer Robinson (2005), who remarks that »our emotional life occurs in »streams« that change all the time in response to ever-changing appraisals, ever-evolving actions and action tendencies, ever-changing bodily states«; in general our emotions are mixed rather than separable, although we may discriminate and catalogue an emotion after the event (Robinson 2005, 79). A more radical statement of this view, the enactive approach, is provided by Ralph Ellis (2005), who dismisses the language of response. Theorized as »extropy«, and contrasted to the standard accounts of homeostasis, extropy is »the maintenance of a suitably complex and higher-energy pattern of overall activity for the organism« (4). It emphasizes »value expressive« as opposed to »drive reductive« tendencies (186). Emotions are at the basis of this approach. In his words, »Emotions are not responses to stimuli, but instead are ongoing, holistically motivated processes that attempt to use environmental affordances to further their self-organizational aims« (47).

In this light, we can see the reader of the Coleridge poem we cited earlier bringing to the reading situation her own pre-existent feelings, and a proclivity to find affordances for their expression in the reading situation with which she is presented. It is not the line in the poem that, as she puts it, »gives me the idea« of alienation and, perhaps, too much quiet; rather, the poem reminds her of, and promotes to consciousness, a feeling that has already been actively shaping her understanding of herself. Perhaps by volunteering for this study, the reader anticipates a shift in feeling, or the emergence of a feeling, that is sought out as a benefit characteristic of literary reading. As Lazarus (1991) remarks, referring to the active, transactional nature of feeling, »To some extent [...] [people] choose the environmental contexts and time frames in which their transactions will take place« (108).

The centrality of emotions in this respect suggests, as Opdahl (2002, 60) has argued, that emotion represents its own way of knowing or representing, and that it should be regarded as a third mode alongside the familiar dual code model consisting of language and imagery (cf. Paivio 1986). While it is well established that for words and images we have distinctively organized memory structures, only recently has it been demonstrated that we also have a (third) dimension of the memory system for emotional experiences (LeDoux 1996; Robinson 2005, 70–71); an important feature of this memory appears to be the rapidity with which it is accessed independently of cognitive processing (which is comparatively much slower). In addition to memory, however, emotion as a separate mode of knowing instantiates its own particular processes, distinct from those that characterize thinking in words or images (although often closely related to one or other of these modes). In the service of literary response, these appear to include the anticipatory properties of feeling, its ability to cross con-





ventional semantic boundaries, its paradoxical power to reinstate suspense at a second reading, and several other processes. This aspect of feeling, the distinctive processes it embodies, is perhaps the most neglected domain in the field as a whole, yet has much promise for casting new light on the nature of literary reading.

Even if our emotion processes are continuous, as Ellis argued, feelings often occur in an episodic fashion, thus the question remains of what is at the inception of a feeling; this will be of particular interest in the literary context when we inquire what occurs during reading. Thus this issue, what appraisal process occurs to initiate a feeling, is still an important and contentious issue. The strongest advocate for a form of cognitive appraisal has been Lazarus. But Damasio (1999) and others have shown that a cognitive process without emotion – pure rationality – is deficient, lacking direction, as cases of patients with frontal lesions studied by Damasio demonstrate. For the normal person a prior appraisal devoid of feeling is impossible.

Whatever primary appraisal occurs, then, is affective. This has been argued recently and in some detail by Jenefer Robinson in her book *Deeper than Reason* (2005). Rejecting judgement theories of emotion, of the type proposed by Lazarus, Robinson argues that an emotion process involves at least three sequential phases: an affective appraisal, a set of physiological responses, and lastly a cognitive appraisal that refines or modifies the ongoing response (Robinson 2005, 59). Robinson notes that we have a separate emotional memory system (70), apparently sited in the amygdala (71), and that any current situation may arouse or reinstate an emotion memory. She also refers to Damasio's more complex theory of the »somatic marker«, a form of felt memory acquired from bodily responses to prior experience (73). But Robinson, who goes on to build a theory of aesthetic response on the basis of this sequential model of feeling, is not entirely consistent in the theory of affective appraisal that she proposes, since she also draws heavily on the account of affective response elaborated by the neuropsychologist LeDoux (1996). While LeDoux showed that the brain provides a rapid route to the amygdala for sensory signals, which means that an affective response occurs first, much faster than the ensuing cognitive processing in the cortex, this constitutes what he called a »quick and dirty« processing route (50). Thus, Robinson notes, »affective appraisals are always primitive and speedy« (151), »initiated on the basis of crude stimulus properties« (51). This makes the source of the subtle discriminations apparent during literary reading hard to understand. However, in its emphasis on appraisal, Robinson's model is a modified version of the older interrupt theory, despite acknowledgements she makes that emotional life involves one emotion changing into another and that »our emotional life occurs in *streams*« (311). Literary reading involves rapid and complex processing which cannot be well explained by a »quick and dirty« feeling appraisal. It may often include the more complex kind of emotion memory





suggested by Damasio (1999). In Damasio's account, perception of any kind implicates bodily changes, even merely thinking about an object. »The records we hold of the objects and events that we once perceived include the motor adjustments we made to obtain the perception in the first place and also include the emotional reactions we had then. They are all coregistered in memory, albeit in separate systems« (Damasio 1999, 148).

An understanding of the complexity of feelings has developed in recent research literature, and this provides a more complex model of a memory system for feeling as well as a bridge to considering its cultural significance. Perhaps the most coherent proposal is that of Jesse Prinz (2004), who puts forward a three-level theory of emotion comprising bodily inputs (level 1), experiential aspects (level 2), and high level or prototypic aspects (level 3). This is not a sequential model, as such, since a feeling process might unfold either bottom-up from bodily sensations or top-down when we anticipate the costs of controlling a specific action response (214).

Support for Prinz's approach is evident in distinctions made by several other scholars of emotion. A parallel scheme of Lambie and Marcel (2002) refers to three aspects of emotion: the neurophysiological (which, of course, includes representations of somatic events), the phenomenal, and awareness of the experience, or how it is to be categorized (229). Similarly, Martha Nussbaum (2001) echoes Prinz's second and third levels in her discussion of two levels of emotional response to fiction: in her view, when we feel pity for a character, for instance, we also feel the significance of pity that exists in the world generally (245). As Prinz elsewhere points out, citing Kenny (1963), a similar distinction has been made between the formal object of an emotion (that property of an event that elicits the emotion), and the particular object (the event itself) (62). This is a type/token distinction: a given emotion is experienced in its immediacy and particularity (the token), but at the same time we may (although not always) be aware of the larger significance, its existence as a type of emotion that takes other forms at other times. Patrick Hogan (2003b) also offers a version of this distinction, referring to the third level as the prototypic basis for understanding emotions (see also Prinz 2004, 72–73). In identifying an emotion that we see someone experiencing, Hogan says, »we do so by comparing his/her situation with prototypical situations and his/her response with prototypical responses« (83); the person in question is, of course, experiencing at that moment a particular instance (or token) of the emotion.

In discussing the feelings that occur during reading, Prinz's distinction between three levels will be helpful to clarify the type of experience, its source, and how readers understand and report it. For instance, the reader with whom we started, in her first comment on the poem, says that it reminds her of England, and that it »gives me the idea of being sort of isolated and alone and alienated«: here, »the idea of« shows the reader engaging with the poem at the level of type,





as well as at the level of detail (the »old and mossy« bridge). To evoke feeling at the level of type may be to make the feeling available to being identified in other contexts, giving this particular feeling a more general role in developing a sense of the poem's significance. A reader who remains at the level of particularity, such as a feeling tied to an autobiographical memory, may find it more difficult to arrive at a view of the poem as a whole.

### 3. Feelings and the Self

It is generally assumed that emotions primarily refer to the self, alerting us to issues of importance to the self, including the extended concerns that we experience in relation to close family members or other affective partners (Robinson 2005, 109–110). What is less clear is how emotion accomplishes this. Is the primary function of emotion to draw our attention (more rapidly than cognitive processes could do) to a state of affairs that is relevant to our concerns, and to mobilize bodily reactions when appropriate? In this case, how is it possible for us to experience emotions in response to works of art such as literary texts, when our own concerns appear not to be in question and bodily responses would seem irrelevant (the paradox of fictional emotions)? As I have suggested elsewhere (Miall 1989), emotions appear to have an intrinsically anticipatory component. While this is obvious in the case of emotions such as fear or pride, it is less clear with nostalgia or sadness – although, as Frijda (2005) points out, »Even one's sadness is a cherished experience one does not willingly let go of, because as long as the sadness is there, the lost one is not entirely gone« (493). What is missing here, I suggest, is a larger conception of the self at issue during an emotion. Not only are particular concerns implicated in a given emotion (such as my bodily integrity when I experience fear, or the loss of a part of my identity in sadness), but the image I have of myself is at issue. A particular emotion anticipates the self that I am about to become in the process of following its action promptings. In this light, the appraisal that is a central theme of several emotion theories appears to be a focus in particular on the potential changes of this anticipated self, enabling reflection whether this changed self concept is one to be welcomed or rejected. As Bergson (1911) puts it, capturing this moment: »I pass in review my different affections: it seems to me that each of them contains, after its kind, an invitation to act, with at the same time leave to wait and even to do nothing« (2). Even an apparently retrospective emotion such as nostalgia for a lost relationship can be seen as a response to a projected change (who I will be if I finally give up that particular longing). This approach, I will suggest, enables a better understanding of the problem of fictional emotions.

It also helps to situate our emotions and feelings more clearly within a cultural context, since our concerns largely arise within, and are defined by, the cul-





tural framework that surrounds us. The issue is put this way by William Downes (2000): »The highest level specification of affect is within social situations as a projection of the wider culture.« The feeling system, in Downes's words, »adds a normative aspect specified by the culture as part of the representation. The culture shapes the interpretation of the arousal« (108). This, in part, is what the third level of feeling supplies: a normative, or prototypical meaning. That is, culture tells you what you are supposed to feel. As William Reddy (2001) puts it, in any human culture we would expect to find »that communities construe emotions as an important domain of effort,« and that they provide counsel, strategies, and a concept of the ideal balance for »emotional equilibrium« (55). We might consider literary texts an important vehicle for such cultural work (although literature may challenge prevailing conceptions of the cultural significance of an emotion rather than instruct readers in it: see, for example, van Peer's (1996) account of *Romeo and Juliet*).

These proposals seem appropriate in general, but they overlook one significant issue. While the content of emotion and its expression may be determined by the local cultural context, the process of emotion itself, its psychological constraints and affordances, appear to be independent of culture and set their own intrinsic demands. For example, a particular emotion may be accompanied by a specific configuration of facial muscles; it may induce the release of hormones that influence the body in distinctive ways; each emotion may draw on distinctive areas within the brain, as Damasio et al. (2000) showed through brain-imaging studies. In addition, just as working memory limitations place a constraint on how many items can be actively considered at the same time, so the »bandwidth« of a particular emotion may fill the mind to the exclusion of other considerations, giving it control precedence (a feature included in the Laws of Emotion outlined by Frijda 1988, 2007). In several other respects also, such as the anticipatory properties I mentioned earlier, feeling operates according to its own inherent mental and physical laws. An adequate theory of emotion must in these and other ways take account of both the inherent features of emotion and its cultural embeddedness.

#### 4. Literary Reading and Feeling

So far I have been painting with a broad brush some of the principle arguments for considering feeling as central to literary response. I will now focus in more detail on three particular aspects of literary reading that show the work of feeling: first the response to foregrounding, second, the experience of being transported during reading, then our empathic response to characters in fiction. This will help confirm that feeling sets the agenda, as it were, for subsequent cognitive processing.





Foregrounding, that is, a range of stylistic features evident in literary texts, evokes feeling. As my colleague Don Kuiken and I showed in a series of studies with short stories (Miall/Kuiken 1994), readers typically report that the more foregrounding a sentence contains the more feeling it arouses. We can thus also speculate that foregrounding provides one of the tools for creating temporal momentum in reading, opening up potentially new domains of meaning, perhaps by drawing on emotional memory (whether episodic or prototypical). But in this respect the feeling arising from foregrounding appears to bypass or unsettle cognitive processes (43). As I mentioned earlier, LeDoux (1996) and others have shown that in the initial neurological processing of a signal, the first route to the feeling centre in the amygdala is approximately twice as fast as the second route to the cortical areas (what Hogan 2003a, following LeDoux, calls the »low road« of affective processing, in contrast to the longer »high road« via the cortex: 174). This suggests that the pace at which foregrounded elements are encountered also appears to be faster than can be assimilated consciously: the process required for an impulse to reach consciousness appears to be about half a second. As Damasio (1999) puts it, »We are probably late for consciousness by about five hundred milliseconds« (127). Thus, in examining the reading times per syllable that we collected in our foregrounding studies (Miall/Kuiken 1994), we find that the average time to read each syllable is typically around 250 to 300 msec, well below the horizon of consciousness; thus much initial processing must occur prior to awareness. Since one syllable may encompass or participate in several foregrounding features, the initial impetus to processes of feeling outside awareness may be rich and complex (i.e., far from the initial »quick and dirty« processing on which Robinson (2005, 50) based her response model).

A neurophysiological demonstration that readers are sensitive at this level to foregrounding has been provided by Hoorn (1996). He measured readers' EEG to determine what event-related potentials (ERPs) would be manifested during processing of an unexpected foregrounded feature. Readers were presented with a set of short rhyming verses in which the last line sometimes featured either a semantic incongruity (wrong word) or a phonological incongruity (no rhyme word). (Experimental constraints prevented Hoorn from analysing the effect of correct but unexpected foregrounding events.) The response to these incongruous effects seems to have been registered by a significantly larger N400 response (a negative wave at 400 msec) than occurs when the effect is expected. This begins for the reader what Hoorn calls »the *aesthetics of alteration*« (356) – what we term defamiliarization. Thus, if Damasio is right, the first response to foregrounding demonstrated here at 400 msec must be preconscious, including the evocation of feeling memories. Hence the richness of felt meaning once the response becomes consciously available to the reader at 500 msec. As Owen Barfield (1964) remarked, the »*interior significance*« of defamiliarization »must be felt as arising from a different plane or mode of consciousness« (170–171).





The ability of a literary text to attract and hold our attention is, of course, based in part on such an experience: through the feelings evoked in us we sense the development within us of unfamiliar meanings that the text we are reading will help us elucidate, hence the common observation that we become »lost in a book« (Nell 1988) or absorbed by it, to the extent that we lose touch with our surroundings and the outside world. Called »transport«, a theory of immersion in reading was first proposed by Richard Gerrig (1993) and has been studied empirically by Melanie Green (2004). The relevance of feeling to this state is evident in Green's definition of transport as »an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events« in which the reader is likely to lose access to aspects of the real world, and may have beliefs about the real world altered as a result (248). The reader may develop strong emotions during transport; and transport itself is more likely when the reader can relate to a sympathetic protagonist (Green/Brock 2000, 702).

Another important implication of transportation seems to be its independence of type of text: Green/Brock (2000, 712–713) report that whether readers believe themselves to be reading an account of a dream, a fiction, or a newspaper report, no differences in degree of transportation occurred. Interestingly, pre-reading instructions not focused on experiencing the text have virtually no effect: readers in one study were told to look for words or phrases that would be difficult at 4<sup>th</sup> grade level, but this group of readers »spontaneously commented that they had tried to look for difficult words and phrases but had gotten caught up in the story and had been unable to do so. It appeared that the power of the narrative text, for some readers, overwhelmed task intentions« (710). A similar problem was encountered by László (1999): he asked participants to underline all the adjectives in a literary text, but they found it impossible to comply since, once embarked on reading the text, the reading absorbed all their attention. This finding supports what Green/Brock (2000) refer to as the »text hegemony hypothesis« (702–703; see also Green/Brock 2003, 137–138). To the extent that transport depends on foregrounding, then, we can see that even despite their conscious intentions, foregrounding tends to capture and direct the responses of readers.

What else may be occurring during transport? As Green has shown, emotions are clearly central to the experience. But in engaging with the narrative are we simulating, for example, the feelings of the protagonist? Susan Feagin (1996) defines simulation as empathy while reading fiction: »The extent to which one empathizes is the extent to which one's own mental functioning simulates that of another person« (88). Under appropriate conditions, simulation gives us knowledge of what it is like to be a certain sort of person (110), knowledge that is experiential not propositional. When we say that a fictional account enables me to experience the same feelings as a character (by imagining myself attempting to carry out her goals, in Keith Oatley's (2002) terms), the identity cannot be





complete – I do not have the same history and relationships as that character. There is an asymmetry between character and reader, as Noël Carroll (1990) puts it: »very often we have different and, in fact, more information about what is going on in a fiction than do the protagonists, and consequently, what we feel is very different from what the character may be thought to feel« (90–91). Carroll thus rejects the notion of identification with a character. Berys Gaut (1999), in contrast, argues that »we need not identify in all respects with the character; we pick on those aspects that are currently salient (205); and this opens the possibility of empathy, that is, actually feeling what the character feels (206). Gaut points to the role of epistemic identification in fostering empathy: if what we come to know corresponds closely to what a given character knows, we are more likely to share affectively with that character (210).

Yet the identification can never be complete. Moreover, the pleasure gained from fiction often comes from experiencing empathy with characters of a kind with whom we are unfamiliar, from a different culture, or even just a different gender. Empathy, notes Murray Smith (1995) comes from »Centrally imagining a scenario from the attitudinal perspective of a person other than oneself.« Unlike Oatley (1984), however, who suggests that empathy involves adopting the character's goals (69–70), Smith says this does not require us »to share any values, beliefs, or goals with the perceived« (96). I can empathize with Montresor in Poe's »The Cask of Amontillado«, for example, although I am repelled by all that he sets out to do and his motivation for doing it.

If I experience empathy, then, what am I simulating? The enactive view of feeling (Ellis 2005) I described earlier suggests that the textual description of a feeling or an occasion for feeling is adequate to reinstate a feeling from my existing repertoire, with whatever variants or nuances are required to match the fictional situation – and textual features such as a foregrounded phrase or the description of a setting may modify my existing understanding of the feeling. But literary feeling, including empathy, seems to require more than this.

To empathize, in the terms of Prinz's (2004) levels of emotion, includes both the bodily and experiential aspects of the character's feelings together with those prototypical aspects that situate the feeling for us as the product and outcome of natural and cultural laws. To empathize in this sense is both to simulate the experience of the character at that moment and to realize her as an example of the laws of feeling, although in our consciousness as readers, unless we deliberate on it, this second dimension is likely to be present only as a dim, penumbral sense of anticipation. An example is provided in a recent paper in which we reported a study of readers' responses to Coleridge's poem »The Rime of the Ancient Mariner« (Kuiken/Miall/Sikora 2004). We asked readers to think aloud about passages they found striking. One reader selected the lines about the pursuing fiend (»Like one, that on a lonesome road [...]«, lines 446–451), and said:





I'm just going to share the emotion of being alone in the dark with this threat. [...] Loneliness is being, having no one around to help you, feeling like you're the only person, there's nobody else that's near enough to do you any good [...] no point in trying to get away from it, it's your fate [...] a reminder that everybody dies. (190)

In this comment we can see a self-referential aspect, evident in the use of the plural pronoun »you« which, as we have noted in a number of studies, usually signifies the convergence of the reader with the protagonist; the reader is thus empathizing with the Mariner and recognizing that they share a common fate. At the same time, the reader evidently begins to characterize the loneliness she sees in prototypic terms, »Loneliness is being, having no one around to help you«, a feeling that also connotes the loss of community (»there's nobody else«) and her sense of impotence (»no point in trying to get away from it«).

Thus, as this example demonstrates, while reading a given episode, with its interwoven net of feelings, the laws of a particular feeling are experienced not only as these are realized in their self-referential implications for us as readers and the intentions towards a future state that they pose for us and enable us to glimpse, but we also experience how the dynamics of those laws interact with and may conflict with other preexisting or as yet nascent feelings.

Our vivid experience of a character's feelings, then, is compatible with an awareness of the prototypical, lawful nature of those feelings; indeed, we could argue that literariness requires such a complex experience. This proposal accommodates the notion of aesthetic disinterest: the lawful, prototypical dimension of feeling is independent of our personal interests although suggestive of self-referential implications. It was defined by Kant in the *Third Critique* as the aesthetic idea, the non-conceptual realm, what Kirk Pillow (2000) has called »the uncanny Other ›outside‹ our conceptual grasp« (2). Aesthetic disinterest is an essential component of literariness, then, because the laws of feeling that it intimates are not our laws: our feelings are, in this respect, not unique to us, except that they unfold within us as inheritors of a psychophysiological system shaped by several million years of evolution; feelings that, even as they represent for us what is most intimate and personal in our experience, also situate us in relation to potential action and changes in the self-concept – feelings that appear at times active and intended (since we can invite and facilitate them) and at other times are undergone passively (when their implications work themselves out regardless of our interests).

This paradoxical aspect of feelings helps to account for aesthetic disinterest, showing that we can combine both passionate concern for a fictional character and an apparently objective appreciation of the feelings we experience on behalf of the character. One problem of empathy with fictional characters, as a number of scholars have defined it, is that it appears to require belief in the reality of the fictional character, which seems untenable. How can we have real feelings for fictional characters? The proposal I have put forward here, though, does not





require belief in this respect. What is required for the feelings to take possession of our minds is to sense how the laws of feeling are realized in the narrative situation, a realization that embodies its own truth and projects it beyond the narrative moment, enabling it to illuminate our own lives in the process. The question of belief (following Coleridge's (1817/1983) well-known formula that literary reading requires »the suspension of disbelief«) has been focused in the wrong place: on the reality of the character and her situation. For example, in the case of cinema, Ed Tan (1995) refers to the audience as an »invisible witness«, supported by the convention that characters never look directly at the camera. In the present account, belief is, on the contrary, evoked by the prototypical truth of the *feelings* we experience for characters, not the characters themselves. While the fiction of one or two centuries ago (the period of Realism) was designed to help the reader feel immersed in real, ongoing events in the company of real characters, other literature from most other periods makes no pretence at being a direct representation of reality, but often foregrounds its artifice. Consider another genre: opera makes no claim to realism, since we never hear dialogue set to music outside the theatre; yet the situations portrayed in opera have the power to engage us and move us as powerfully as any literary text, pointing once again to the prototypical role of feeling as the basis of our empathy for operatic characters.



## 5. Conclusion



In conclusion, I will briefly summarize some of the issues I have raised. I suggested that the sense of literariness may be defined as the interaction during reading of formal features of texts with some distinctive properties of feeling. I argued for recuperating the concept of aesthetic disinterest by locating it within the prototypical or lawful aspects of feeling: we sense these working themselves out in us through our response to literature. Thus literary reading represents one significant way in which we come to choose the environment that will impact upon us, perhaps changing us, making us more adaptive in the process. Within this large-scale context for reading occur small-scale and medium-scale processes that demonstrate the role of feeling. Moment by moment the reader responds to the stylistic and structural features of the text: foregrounding is found striking, it defamiliarizes, invoking feelings that may lead to a new context for interpretation; but the initial feeling in response to foregrounding is rapid and prior to consciousness, evoking in its wake a sense of strangeness and a richness of potential meaning on another plane. At the medium-scale readers empathize with characters, inferring how they feel; and in feeling what a character feels, readers appear to sense the prototypical significance of a feeling and the laws by which it operates within us. At the large scale feeling enables us to sustain and





shape our sense of the literary text as a whole – this is not an aspect that I considered in this article, but Coleridge sums it up well in a remark in one of his notebooks: reading with feeling, he says, »we *become* that which we understandly behold & hear, having, how much God perhaps only knows, created part even of the Form« (II, 2086).

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