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# 8 Empathy, Fiction, and Non-Fiction

*Derek Matravers*

## 8.1 Introduction

Can we empathize with fictional characters? Here is a *prima facie* problem: A can only successfully empathize with B if A shares B's mental states. However, if A is a reader and B is a fictional character then this cannot happen as B, being fictional, has no mental states. Although this was once thought to be a problem (see, e.g., Feagin 1996, 83–112) few people seem to worry much about it now. The current view is that the acts of empathizing happen within the scope of imaginatively engaging with the fictional world. That is, in reading *A Study in Scarlet*, I do not imagine that Sherlock Holmes has a fictional psychology, I imagine he has a real psychology. Hence, in as much as any empathizing I do happens within the scope of the imaginative project, I empathize with a real psychology.

I am going to grant, for the sake of argument, that this model is correct. For independent reasons I am suspicious of the term “empathy” and incline to the view that it should be dropped from philosophical discourse. Again, for the sake of argument, I shall put that to one side and allow that the term does pick out some psychological relation. My concern in this chapter is to discover whether there is anything distinctive about our empathy with characters in fictions as opposed to characters in non-fictions. My category of non-fiction is narrower than some; I restrict it to those works that exhibit what John Grierson called “the creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1933, 8). This includes most if not all histories, biographies and much of what we find in the newspapers, but excludes annuals, chronicles and factual reports of the sort that stockbrokers might study over breakfast.

That the issue concerns our empathy with characters in fictions is standardly assumed in the philosophical literature (in what follows, all italicization is mine). For example, Jenefer Robinson (2005, 105) says the problem is that of “explaining how our emotional response to novels, plays, and movies help us understand them, to understand characters, and grasp the significance of events in the plot” (her later discussion makes it clear that by “plays and movies” she means *fictional* plays and movies). In his “In

Search of Narrative”, Matthew Kieran (2003, 69–70) discusses the claim that

[w]hen I want to understand the nature of a character’s experience and their attitude toward their own experience (what their character is really like), then I need to simulate [empathize]. A deep understanding of *fictional characters* requires simulation [empathy], though a shallow understanding of them need not.

Kieran eventually rejects the claim. My point, however, is that the claim that he thinks is up for discussion is a claim exclusively about fictional characters (the relevant subsection of the paper is entitled “Empathizing with *fictional characters*”) (Kieran 2003, 83). Similarly, Noël Carroll (2010) entitles his contribution to the debate “On Some Affective Relations between Audiences and the Characters in *Popular Fictions*”. My claim in this chapter is that this is wrong-headed. There is no reason to think there is a difference between our empathy with characters in fictions as opposed to characters in non-fictions, and hence, whatever people take the problem to be, it applies equally to both categories.

Unusually, I will begin with an error theory as to why people might think there is a difference as that will help put the rest of the discussion in context (I shall refer this position as “separatism” and people who support it as “separatists”). I will then give a general reason why there is no difference, before considering three separatist arguments that have been given in the literature and showing why they should all be rejected.

Separatism is grounded in a confusion between two distinctions: that between fiction and non-fiction, and that between representations and face-to-face encounters (I shall call the face-to-face encounters, following earlier work, “confrontations” (Matravers 2014)). This was pointed out in a neglected passage from Kendall Walton’s 1990 book, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*.

Our present concern is not with “fiction” as opposed to “reality”, nor with contrasts between “fiction” and “fact” or “truth” [...]. The difference we are interested in is between *works of fiction* and *works of non-fiction*. The potential for confusion here is considerable and has been amply realized.

(Walton 1990, 73)<sup>1</sup>

The confusion is the error of attempting to explain the distinction between fiction and non-fiction by appealing to the distinction between fiction and reality. This ignores the fact that the contrast between fiction and non-fiction is a contrast *within the broader class of representations*. There is certainly a contrast between it being fictional that I am being attacked by

a dog and it being the case that I am, now, being attacked by a dog. That, however, is unrelated to the distinction between a dog attack in a work of fiction and a dog attack in a work of non-fiction.

This confusion is endemic in the literature. For example, Aaron Meskin and Jonathan Weinberg argue that those subject to fictive affect

Will fail to demonstrate [...] behaviours that would be expected of someone experiencing its nonfictive analogue [...] we do not (generally) find audience members behaving fully as they do when they have emotional responses in ordinary (i.e. non-fictive) life. Horror movie viewers do not typically flee the cinema screaming.

(Meskin and Weinberg 2006, 224)

This is true, of course, but newsreel viewers do not typically flee the cinema screaming either. In general, one does not get further away from what is depicted in a representation by moving away from the representation – whether that representation is fictional or non-fictional. Meskin and Weinberg are attempting to illuminate one distinction (that between fiction and non-fiction) by appeal to an unrelated distinction (that between a representation and a confrontation).

The same confusion underpins the discussion I am considering in this chapter. There are differences between our psychological interactions with represented characters and our psychological interactions with people we meet face-to-face, and, as we shall see, that is often the distinction on which people focus. However, it is unrelated to the distinction in which we are interested: namely, whether there are differences in our psychological interactions with characters met in fictional narratives and characters met in non-fictional narratives.

## 8.2 Represented Characters

I will restrict myself to talking about books rather than other media such as pictures and films although I suspect the account will generalize. My reason for thinking that separatism is false stems from my understanding of what it is to read a book. Fortunately, we do not need to go into great philosophical (or even psychological) depth on this issue. The reader needs to represent the content of the book to him or herself (or, to put it less formally, needs to grasp what is going on in the book). To use the standard vocabulary, the reader forms a “situation model” consisting of the content of the book (Zwaan and Radvansky 1998). The situation model will contain the propositional content of the book which will be some combination of the propositions explicit in the book plus many further propositions either implied by the former or needed to fill in the gaps left

by the former. It will also contain a great deal of non-propositional information. This will include the spatial locations from which the events are “observed”, but also, crucially for the purposes of this chapter, dispositions to various affective reactions to the propositional (and other) content (Gerrig 1993).

Let us take an example. Consider reading a book that has as a protagonist one “Elizabeth”. In the book, Elizabeth meets a man to whom she is attracted, they have a romance of sorts, but somehow it does not work out. In reading the book, the situation model is constructed, including all the reactions of vicarious grief, pity, and admiration. Reading the book might, or will, involve taking on Elizabeth’s perspective (whatever that might mean). All this will take place whether one is reading about Elizabeth Bennett (the heroine of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*) or about Elizabeth 1st (the heroine of countless biographies). In short, when it comes to having psychological interactions with a character, whether that is a character from a fiction or from a non-fiction is irrelevant.

To underline this point let us consider an argument from Jenefer Robinson, a prominent advocate of the role of the emotions in understanding fiction and see if there is anything in that argument that limits to characters in fictions rather than characters in representations more generally. Robinson’s (2005, 125) view is that “responding emotionally is a form of understanding and [...] an interpretation, which claims to give an overall critical reflective understanding of a novel as whole [*sic*], is partly the result of reflection upon our emotional responses to the novel”. Robinson considers responses to the various characters in *Anna Karenina*, *Macbeth*, *The Ambassadors*, and Edith Wharton’s *The Reef*. She claims that one is not able to fully appreciate Anna Karenina’s state of mind when returning to see her son, Seryozha, without engaging our (the readers’) “emotional responses” (Robinson 2005, 108–109).<sup>2</sup>

The claim is that understanding the psychology as depicted (in the case of Anna Karenina, there is no other psychology) sometimes involves being self-conscious about one’s emotional reactions. If this is true, why would it not apply to the depiction of actual psychologies? When we read, our understanding of actual psychologies is through the words in front of us. If emotional reactions have a role in understanding Anna Karenina’s psychology as depicted, what could be the reason for them not having a role in understanding an actual psychology as depicted? In both cases one is feeling one’s way into the mind of a represented character. Separatists who think that understanding a text requires psychological interaction with the characters portrayed therein would have to argue that this applies only to some texts (the fictional ones) and not others (the non-fictional ones) and it is not obvious to me how they would do this.

### 8.3 Three Points of Contention

To force this point home, I shall consider three separatist arguments from a paper by Tom Petraschka: “How Empathy with Fictional Characters Differs from Empathy with Real Persons”. Here is Petraschka’s (2021, 228) first argument.

We have to base our assessment of her affective state on our *interpretation* of the text. And since there are cases where two optimal-yet-contradictory interpretations of a literary text exist, a situation like this can occur: According to optimal interpretation (1), character C is in an affective state a; according to optimal interpretation (2), C is in affective state b. Since no better interpretation (3) exists, I would argue that reader 1 (following interpretation [1]) and reader 2 (following interpretation [2]) are both empathising with C, although their affective states are completely different. Compare this to an analogous case of empathy with a real person, especially one where we, for example, read a factual text about a real person P. In such a case, there is no room for two optimal-yet-contradictory interpretations. There is a simple “fact of the matter” that decides whether empathy with P occurs.

This can be reconstructed as follows.

The following is true of fictional texts and not true of non-fictional texts: (a) when empathizing with a character the reader empathizes with the character’s affective state as represented; (b) how the character’s affective state is represented is a function of how the text is interpreted; (c) there can be equally optimal and incompatible interpretations of the text with respect to that affective state; thus, (d) there can be equally optimal and incompatible representations of a character’s affective state; thus (e) it is possible that there are two readers of whom it is true that they are empathizing with the character, but whose mental states are different.

In a fiction, the psychology of the character is manifest in the depiction and what is manifest constitutes the psychology of the character. Petraschka is surely right that different interpretations can give rise to different psychologies, and hence there is scope for there to be two readers each to empathize with one of the two psychologies. In a non-fiction, the psychology of the character is manifest in the depiction, but that is not what constitutes the psychology of the character. Their psychology is, obviously, something that exists outside of the text and in the actual world. Hence, unlike in the case of fiction, there are (potentially) three options for readers of non-fiction when it comes to empathy. They can (1) empathize with the psychology as depicted; (2) empathize with the individual’s actual psychology; or (3) we can assume that the depiction necessarily tracks the actual psychology, in which case empathizing with the psychology as depicted

will be empathizing with the actual psychology. Option (3) assumes that non-fictional representations provide transparent access to reality. A forceful denial of this claim can be found in the works of Hayden White (1987). Although White is prone to exaggeration, the core of his view is, I think, uncontroversial. Narratives embody perspectives and perspectives – by definition – give us a take on reality, rather than reality itself (see Goldie 2012, 13–25; Matravers 2022). There is no necessary connection between the psychology as depicted and the actual psychology.

This leaves us with (1) and (2). To think that (2) is the appropriate option would be to fall into the error, previously identified, of mistaking the representation/confrontation distinction for the fiction/non-fiction distinction. Our concern is with characters as depicted in a (fictional or non-fictional) narrative. Recall what was said above: reading a book involves building a situation model of the content of that book, which would include the various psychological relations we have to the characters in that book. Hence, in reading a book about the Suez Crisis (say, Robert Rhodes James's *Anthony Eden*) the relevant affective state is that which is incorporated into the situation model: that is, to Eden *as depicted* (in Rhodes James's book he is depicted sympathetically). The actual state of mind of the actual Eden plays no role in the psychology of the reader. Hence, in the above reconstruction of Petraschka's argument, (a) and (b) are equally true of non-fictional texts. I am happy to concede that, in general, non-fictional texts are less prone to there being equally optimal and incompatible interpretations of a character's affective state (although there are instances<sup>3</sup>) but it is not clear why that would be relevant. It would still be true that, in both cases, the reader empathized with the character *as interpreted* – the difference would only be that, in the fictional case, there are sometimes equally optimal and incompatible representations of a character's affective state while, in the non-fictional case, that is generally not true – but so what?

Petraschka's second separatist argument turns on the claim that fictions are an aesthetic artefact and thus our attention ought to be drawn to their aesthetic structure rather than engaging with characters and generating empathetic states.

To recognize a fiction as literature means to recognize it as an artwork. And the recognition of an artefact as an artwork comes with the obligation to treat it as an artwork, or, as it is usually phrased, to appreciate it as an artwork [...]. Emotional engagement in general is likely to distract the reader from the aesthetic qualities of an artwork. And since empathy can be understood as one way of engaging with a character, this danger translates into empathetic engagement.

(Petraschka 2021, 229)

Here is my reconstruction of the argument:

(a) We are obliged to treat fictions as artworks; (b) treating a text as an artwork means attending to its aesthetic qualities; (c) emotional reactions to characters distract readers from attending to aesthetic qualities; hence, (d) in fiction, we should not indulge in emotional reactions to characters.

I shall dwell at length on this argument as it rests on much of what is at issue between myself and the separatists. Its evaluation will require us to consider three questions. The first will be to establish some groundwork: namely, are there aesthetic qualities that are peculiar to fiction? That is, aesthetic properties that are characteristic of fiction, and not shared with non-fiction? The second is whether our obligations with respect to aesthetic qualities differ, depending on whether we are reading as fiction or reading as non-fiction. That is, are we obliged to attend to aesthetic properties when reading fiction in a way in which we are not so obliged when reading non-fiction? The third is whether, if so, feeling an emotion is a distraction when reading fiction in a way in which it is not when reading non-fiction.

What are the aesthetic qualities of fiction, and do they differ from the qualities of non-fiction? Petraschka gives a list, taken from the work of Susan Feagin (2010, 636): “the character of the writing, the structure of the plot, the subtle handling of the themes, the vividness and intricacy of its detail”. In addition, he gives the following from Peter Lamarque. In treating a text as an art, we

[a]ttend to the character as an integral part of a linguistic artifact. Other elements, literary elements, come into play. To understand Anna [Karenina], on this conception, is to understand the thematic, symbolic, and meaning-laden relations that the character-as-described enters into with other characters and other incidents in the novel.

(Lamarque 2011, 310)

Let us distinguish two ways of engaging with a text, distinguished by the different properties of the text on which our attention is focussed. The first set of properties are those described above as “aesthetic qualities”. The second set of properties are the succession of states of affairs as represented in the text. Taking *Sense and Sensibility* as our example, the latter would include Marianne not hearing from Willoughby; his failure to acknowledge their relationship at the ball; his returning her letters and tokens; her distress. I shall co-opt some old terminology and refer to the former set of properties as “form” and the latter set as “content”.<sup>4</sup>



Does fiction differ from non-fiction in terms of its aesthetic qualities? Non-fictions, along with fictions, are constructed narratives. Looking back on the quotation from Feagin and substituting “story” for “plot” so as not to beg the question, the author of a non-fiction text has no option but to attend to “the character of the writing, the structure of the [story], the subtle handling of the themes, the vividness and intricacy of its detail”. Any non-fiction will, as a result, have the correlative aesthetic properties to some degree, and the best non-fictions (like the best fictions) will have them to some great degree (we need think only of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Runciman’s *The Crusades*). There is nothing here to suggest that we have identified properties possessed by fiction that are not shared with non-fiction.

In reply, Petraschka might argue that Feagin’s list does not exhaust the relevant aesthetic properties. The elements Lamarque lists, “thematic, symbolic, and meaning-laden relations”, may be thought to apply particularly to fiction rather than to non-fiction. Do non-fictions have “thematic, symbolic, and meaning-laden relations”? Consider the themes of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, which Lamarque discusses in his contribution to this volume. Amongst them will be themes of fate and of relations between the sexes. There are, obviously, countless non-fictions with such themes. Perhaps Lamarque’s claim is that it is only in fictions that themes can play a constitutive role (I shall leave aside what exactly is ‘a constitutive role’). Let us grant that it is a mistake to think that themes have a constitutive role in lived lives (for discussions of this see (Lamarque 2014) and (Goldie 2012, 150–173)) but, as I have said before, that is not the point. The question is whether, *pace* Lamarque, it is possible that themes can play the role they play in (some) non-fictions that they play in (some) fictions. The answer is, surely, that it is possible. Indeed, one reason to embark on writing a biography (or a history, for that matter) is the thought that there are generalizable truths about the human condition to convey. To write a book that uses the story of a life as an exemplar of such a generalizable truth would be to write a book that has that as a constitutive theme.<sup>5</sup>

An author gives a narrative a theme by arranging the events of the narrative in a certain way and describing them in a certain way so as to make salient certain relations between the properties of those events. This can be done with non-fictional content as much as it can be done with fictional content. That is right as far as it goes, however, there is nonetheless a relevant difference between non-fiction and fiction with respect to content. The content of non-fictions is given by what the author believed actually happened and the content of non-fictions is not; it is created. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* Hardy creates the event of Alec’s rape of Tess, her relation to Angel, and her arrest by a group of policemen in order to make content available to him so that he is then able to explore the themes of

the different natures of male domination of women. Thus, the thematic properties are more deeply part of the created structure of a fiction than they are of a non-fiction. For this reason, there are more aspects of form to which the reader can pay attention when reading fiction compared to that available when reading non-fiction. The extent to which this constitutes a difference with respect to our empathetic reactions to fictional and to non-fictional characters will be answered below.

Let us consider Lamarque's second element, symbolism. Lamarque discusses the mud and fog at the beginning of *Bleak House* being a symbol for decay, but there is no reason to think that using one thing to stand for another is the sole province of fiction (Lamarque 2014, 73). For a pithy example, consider Winston Churchill's description of Arthur Balfour's betrayal of Asquith.

He passed from one Cabinet to another, from the Prime Minister who was his champion to the Prime Minister who had been his most severe critic, like a powerful, graceful cat walking delicately and unsoiled across a rather muddy street.

(Churchill 1942, 185).

Perhaps the thought is that symbolism can be part of what makes something fictional in a way that it cannot be part of what makes something non-fiction. In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, part of what constitutes the fictionality is that the farm is a symbol for the Soviet Union. However, analogous symbolism can lie at the heart of non-fictions. Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is, on the surface, an argument to solve the problems of Ireland through cannibalism. It is, of course, a satire and is understood by understanding that the recommendations are symbolic of government policies of the time. One would miss the point of the title of the first volume of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, if one did not take the caged bird as symbolic of the situation of African-Americans in 1940s America. Furthermore, the limited disanalogy we found in the case of themes (invented as opposed to discovered content) does not apply here, as all symbolism is invented.

Finally, let us consider "meaning-laden relations". This is, clearly, a broad heading that could cover a variety of phenomena. I shall take it to mean that the author can arrange the events in their narrative in a way that brings out "meaningful" (that is, more than causal) links between them. If this is what Lamarque means, it is not the sole province of fiction. Authors of fiction can make limited choices as to the order in which they represent events but, barring science fiction, the events will need to be represented as having happened in some order. For example, in the original *Tender is the Night*, Scott Fitzgerald began the book halfway through the

story he represents; armed with this knowledge, readers can see the first half of the story – when they eventually encounter it – as building inexorably to a certain peak. However, employing (to use the Russian formalist terms) the distinction between *fabula* (the story) and *syuzhet* (the order in which it is represented) is not the exclusive province of fictional narratives. Here are some examples at random from my bookshelf. Carl Breihan's *The Complete and Authentic Life of Jesse James* begins with a death; not even the death of James but the death in 1951 of the last person who claimed, fraudulently, to be James. This throws the rest of the book into sharp relief, bringing out the mythologizing tendency of those who think too much about cowboys. Peter Hopkirk begins his *The Great Game* (about the shadowy struggle between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia over central Asia) with an event that somehow symbolizes it all – the execution of Stoddart and Connolly in Bukhara in 1842. Writers of non-fiction can “break the rules” in other ways as well. In his travel book, *Old Calabria*, Norman Douglas devotes an entire chapter to reporting, without scepticism, the tale of Joseph of Copertino and his remarkable ability to fly. This puts the other events in the book in a different light and emphasizes the heroic nature of that part of the world's resistance to modernity. Writers of non-fiction are perfectly able to use both form and content to create meaning-laden relations. Thus, while not denying differences, it is difficult to force systematic distinctions between fiction and non-fiction by appeal to the aesthetic properties listed.

Let us move on to our second question. Are we obliged to attend to both form and content when reading fiction in a way in which we are not so obliged when reading non-fiction? In the literature on pictorial representation, there is a great deal of discussion of viewers' need to engage with both the surface of the painting (the “configurational aspect”) and what is depicted therein (the “recognitional aspect”).<sup>6</sup> There is no comparable discussion of the need of readers to engage with both the form and content of a written representation.<sup>7</sup> Hence, we lack a clear sense of what is going on when readers split their attention in this way. I am not able to provide this here. For our purposes, we can simply bracket that question, and consider the reasons we have to focus on both form and content. The issue is whether we have such reasons when we read fiction and do not have such reasons when we read non-fiction.

Scepticism over whether readers of non-fiction need attend to form is grounded, I will assume, in the claim that (a) the function of non-fiction is the communication of information and (b) the communication of information does not require attending to form. Let us consider these in turn.

It is the status of (a) that seems to be the crucial issue between separatists such as Lamarque and Petraschka and myself. Lamarque sums up the separatist view as follows:

With biographies and autobiographies, it will not be uncommon for readers to attend, and be invited to attend, to the narrative vehicle. This, though, is largely dictated by broader literary concerns with fine writing and stylistic effect. Like all fact-stating discourses, biographies aim to transmit information and are primarily constrained by ‘getting it right’.

(Lamarque 2014, 78)

As the primary concern is ‘getting it right’ empathy with characters of non-fiction will be at best a bonus, possibly a distraction. However, what reason is there to believe the primary concern of people who read non-fiction is the acquisition of information? People read non-fiction for different reasons and which reason is primary is an empirical matter. My belief is that readers are motivated to read non-fictions for broadly similar reasons to those that motivate them to read fictions. Since we started gathering around the campfire, human beings have told each other stories. There are various (often overlapping) genres of stories: histories, historical novels, realist fiction, science fiction, and so on. These genres have different relations to truth: realist fiction should pay heed to the laws of nature, science fiction less so; non-fiction should attend to what actually happened, fiction less so.<sup>8</sup> However, they are all just stories and should be treated as stories. What separatists take to be a root-and-branch rationale is in fact only a genre convention (Friend 2012).

Which of these two views is correct is, as I have said, an empirical matter. The separatist view has the advantage of simplicity, so why should we even consider my suggested alternative? Unlike the separatist view, it can explain phenomena such as the following. Pick any work of popular history off your shelf and read the quotations from reviews. They will not be of the form ‘contains a great many facts’ but are likely to be of the form: ‘a page turner’, ‘reads like a novel’, ‘it is almost as if you can hear Napoleon in the next room’. This suggests that the primary reason people read fiction is consonant with the primary reason they read non-fiction: to get lost in the world of the story. I can enlist some powerful testimony on my behalf. In the preface to his biography of Augustus John, Michael Holroyd writes:

Biography is no longer simply an instrument of information retrieval, though historical and cultural information that is retrieved from these expeditions is a bonus. The biographer’s prime purpose is to recreate a world into which readers may enter and where, interpreting messages from the past, they may experience feelings and thoughts that remain with them after the book is closed.

(Holroyd 2011, xxxiii)

The same point is made, with greater charm, by T.E. Lawrence at the beginning of his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

Half-way through the labour of an index to this book I recalled the practice of my ten years' study of history; and realised I had never used the index of a book fit to read. Who would insult his *Decline and Fall*, by consulting it just upon a specific point?

(Lawrence 1939, 7).

If the primary purpose of a story is what explains why we pick it off the shelf and start to read it, then the primary purpose of any story worth the read is not to transmit information, but to engross us, to transport us to a world that is not our own.<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, part of such a transportation will be the construction of a situation model which features psychological relations to characters, including empathy.

In the light of the rejection of (a), let us consider (b) as a question that applies to all genres: to the extent that a story (any story) engages in the transmission of information, would it follow that there is less reason to attend to its form? To answer this question, we need to be more specific about what we mean by "information". If we simply mean facts (the city of Akaba was captured in 1917) then form is not important. However, the narrative form provides richer resources for understanding than the simple transmission of facts; that could be done as effectively (or more effectively) by an annal or a chronicle. This potential of narrative is brought out in this definition by Peter Goldie.

A narrative is a representation of events which is shaped, organised and coloured, presenting those events, and the people involved in them, from a certain perspective or perspectives, and thereby giving narrative structure – coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import, to what is narrated.

(Goldie 2012, 8)

A narrative is coherent, in that it reveals "connections between the related events, and it does so in a way that a mere list or annal, or chronicle, does not". It has internal meaningfulness; that is, "making sense of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people who are internal to the narrative". Finally, there is evaluative and emotional import: "things matter to people, and a narrative involving people can capture the way things matter to them" (Goldie 2012, 14–25).

Narrative form, then, can help provide a reader with an understanding of the events related. To revert to our example, it can put the recapture of Akaba into the context of the Arab Revolt, the First World War, the

decline of the Ottoman empire, the growth of Arab consciousness, T.E. Lawrence's psychological state, and colonialism. It can make clear why it happened as it happened, what it was like to be there, why people cared, the historical import of the event and so on and so forth. If this is what is meant by "information" then there is little or no intuitive force to the claim that the form in which the content is conveyed is irrelevant. A narrative is able to convey the kind of information it is able to convey precisely because it has what a list, annal, or chronicle, lack: namely, form.

This brings us, finally, to the third question: whether feeling an emotion is a distraction when reading fiction in a way in which it is not when reading non-fiction. The argument that it is a distraction when reading fiction turns on what it is to engage appropriately with a text. In his contribution to this volume, Peter Lamarque, building on the classic paper by Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy", argues that the aim of criticism is understanding "the meaning and achievement" of a text. By this Lamarque means something like understanding how the content emerges from the form and how particular affects are achieved (this is not meant to be exhaustive). Hence, the actual felt emotion (the "tears, prickles or physiological symptoms") are, if not a distraction, only the starting point of enquiry (Lamarque, in this volume). The critical reader's task is to understand how, or whether, such a reaction is justified by the text. Let us grant that this is the function of criticism. Having established that fiction and non-fiction share at least some aesthetic properties, and that the obligations to attend to such properties do not differ between fiction and non-fiction, it follows that there is no reason to think that the critical appraisal appropriate to *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* will necessarily differ from the critical appraisal appropriate to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. If the critics' task is to understand the meaning and achievement of the text, why should it matter whether the text is fictional or non-fictional? In both cases the "tears, prickles or physiological symptoms" will only be a starting point for greater critical exploration.

I have dwelt at length on Petraschka's second argument, as it is built on deep differences between our two views. The final argument, with turns on degrees of difficulty, can be dealt with more quickly. He sums up the position thus:

Literature makes empathy with its protagonists both harder and easier at the same time. The situations that characters find themselves in and the emotional states they experience are very often extreme or special. This makes it hard to empathize with them. The extensive amount of effort needed to empathize with them, however, is then lessened by the means literature typically employs to facilitate empathy [...].

(Petraschka 2021, 230)

In as much as we empathize with characters, this seems correct. However, there is clearly nothing in there that suggests a distinction between fiction and non-fiction. It is true that Dostoyevsky enables us to feel some psychological affinity with Raskolnikov, but it is also true that David Crane enables us to feel some psychological affinity with Robert Falcon Scott in his biography of the great explorer. That, to put it bluntly, this is one of the things that books do.

I think it is telling in Petraschka's paper that although his title promises one distinction – "How Empathy with *Fictional Characters* Differs from Empathy with Real Persons" – his arguments generally argue for another. His conclusion is that "empathy with characters is special and differs from empathy with persons" (agreed) and his final section, headed "Conclusion", does not mention "fiction" at all (Petraschka 2021, 230). Indeed, if the arguments of this chapter are correct, Petraschka's paper would be more profitably read as a reasoned defence of the distinction between empathy for represented characters and empathy for characters encountered face-to-face.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, my argument is that if we are engaging with a representation, we meet characters depicted in that representation via the descriptions that are given to them. Our psychological interactions with such characters are part and parcel with our representing them to ourselves, via those descriptions. This is true whether the representations are fictional or non-fictional. Hence, the big divide – if there is a divide – is not between empathy felt for characters in fiction and empathy felt for characters in non-fiction, but empathy felt for characters in representations and empathy felt for characters in confrontations.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Walton thought the confusion had been "amply realized" in 1990; it is difficult to think of words to describe the situation since.
- 2 Peter Lamarque discusses Robinson's example in his contribution to this collection, disagreeing with her claim that, with respect to narrative, felt emotion precedes understanding. I take no view on that here; my point is, *pace* Lamarque, that whatever is said applies to both fiction and non-fiction. I discuss Lamarque's own views below.
- 3 Hemingway, as represented in Carlos Baker's biography, seems to me a case in point (Baker 1969).
- 4 This distinction is similar to that which underpins Peter Lamarque's distinction between the "internal" and the "external" perspective we can take on a text, and that which underpins Patrick Colm Hogan's distinction between "fiction emotions" and "artefact emotions". Neither Lamarque's nor Hogan's distinctions will serve my purpose as they (mistakenly in my view) import elements of the fiction/non-fiction distinction in making them (see Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 143–148; Hogan 2018, 98, Lamarque in this volume).
- 5 Thus, it is no surprise to find biographies with titles such as the following: *Churchill: A Study in Failure (1900–1939)* or *A Spirit Undaunted: The Political Role of George VI*.

- 6 The literature on this is vast. The starting point is Wollheim (1980).
- 7 The various positions taken in the literature on pictorial representations also seem options for written representations. For example, Ernst Gombrich (1977) held that viewers alternate between the two – a view which seems to be held by Peter Lamarque. However, there seems room for an analogue of Richard Wollheim’s view that there is a single complex experience that covers both aspects.
- 8 As Stacie Friend points out, these conventions are not immutable. In the Ancient World, history had a more flexible relation to truth than it does now (Friend 2012).
- 9 The view I hold has an undischarged debt to explain why there is a genre that has a close relation to truth – what is the point of history? I hope to solve this problem (also noted by Walton) in future work (Walton 1990, 96).
- 10 Petraschka’s paper is one of four in a symposium on “Empathy and Literature”, all of which take themselves to be dealing with the fictional. The arguments of the other three papers, while framed as being about fictions, apply indifferently to fictions and non-fictions.
- 11 This chapter was originally given at a conference in Duisburg in May 2022. I would like to thank Christiana Werner and Tom Petraschka for their invitation, and to both of them and Peter Lamarque for comments. The editors provided valuable feedback on my draft. Despite my attempts to address his concerns, I fear Petraschka remains unconvinced. Hence, I should stress that errors, omissions, and rank implausibilities are solely my responsibility.

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