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Feeling from the Perspective of the Empirical Study of Literature

Empirical study of literature has primarily emerged from two sources: literary theory (especially theories of stylistics and narrative) and psychology (personality, discourse processing, emotion). In this paper I apply its insights to a study of the place of feeling in literary reading, focusing in particular on the experiences of the ordinary or »common« reader.

Are feelings incidental to reading, or do they play a more fundamental role? In this essay it will be proposed that feeling is the vehicle for some distinctive and central aspects of literary response. Six aspects are discussed. First, the active and continuous nature of feelings in our thoughts and actions has been established by neuropsychologists such as Damasio. As Ellis points out, we actively seek avenues for the expression and development of our emotions. Literary reading provides an important vehicle for soliciting familiar and novel experiences of feeling. Separate from language and imagery, as Opdahl has proposed, feeling provides a third way of knowing, specifically in its anticipatory properties, its power to relate concepts across conceptual boundaries, and other processes which may be significant to literary reading. The richness of experiential meaning in response to the stylistic aspects of literature is also attributed to feeling, based on the finding that the pathways to the feeling centres in the brain convey input more rapidly than the parallel cognitive pathways. This indicates a reconstrual of the concept of appraisal that suggests it is affective; thus feeling is likely to play a central role in subsequent cognitive construals (while itself becoming open to later cognitive reconstrual).

The architecture of the feeling and emotion system appears to involve three levels: bodily aspects, the experiential level, and prototypes. This model is supported by the independent theories of several other scholars in both philosophy and psychology. One of its implications is the distinction it enables between our recognition of the formal object of a feeling and a particular occasion of that feeling (a type/token distinction). It is shown that literary readers generalize the significance of feeling by moving from the token to the type. This distinction also provides a basis for considering the problem of empathy or identification with a character in a literary text, including the question how we can experience real feelings for fictional characters.

Feelings and emotions have typically been considered self-referential. In the literary context, it is argued, feeling in particular evokes not only the concerns of the self but a larger sense of the self concept and how this might evolve. Feeling provides a context in which relevant issues can come to awareness. In addition,

feeling provides a sense of the cultural context in which the self finds its place (and which might then be seen as open to modification). Alongside the cultural implications of feeling, however, we must also consider the intrinsic structures and processes of feeling given to us by evolution (from facial expression to hormonal responses), but especially the »laws« of emotion as proposed by Frijda, such as the »control precedence« of emotion (its capacity to take over and determine consciousness). Such laws may be challenged or opened to question by the manipulation of feeling during our experience of reading.

Empirical examples of the work of feeling are considered. Response to foregrounding (the occurrence of stylistically distinctive features at the level of sound, syntax, or semantics) has been demonstrated neurologically by Hoorn: occurring in the first 400 msec, it initiates what he terms »the *aesthetics of alteration*«. Given that foregrounding tends to compel the reader's attention, as do various narrative aspects, it has also been shown that readers may develop strong feelings when they become absorbed in a literary text, an aspect that Green has studied under the term »transport«. In the case of a powerful text with a compelling narrative, it has been found that the origin of the text (whether based on fact or a fiction) makes no difference to the degree of transportation – a finding that Green refers to as the »hegemony of the text«.

The feelings experienced by readers also include what has typically been called »empathy« or »identification with a character«. Oatley explains this as a process in which the reader simulates a character's experience, taking on her goals. It is argued that this is not required: what occurs is evocation of a feeling from our existing repertoire accompanied by a sense of the lawful nature of its processes and outcomes; thus a feeling of empathy enables us to recognize the implications of the feeling for ourselves. It is suggested that our sense of what is literary may come from engaging with feeling at the prototypical level (as we termed it earlier), which points to processes independent of our will; this may account for our sense of aesthetic disinterest. The »truth« of feelings in this respect helps explain how we experience real feelings for fictional characters. The feelings that we contribute to our literary reading are in some degree responsible for our sense of the dynamic form of the literary text.

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