

Empathy and the Critic

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Empathy is suddenly hot in the academy—as a topic of inquiry, if not a professional practice. Scientific researchers have discovered the existence of *mirror neurons*, which fire both when a person performs an action or feels an emotion and when that person views someone else having the same experience. Mirror neurons, in other words, indicate that there is a biological foundation for empathy (Iacoboni, “Imitation” and *Mirroring People*; Avenanti et al.; Bufalari et al.). In *The Age of Empathy*, primatologist Franz de Waal extends these findings by considering how innate sensitivity to faces, bodies, and voices constitutes the origin of kindness. Elsewhere, scholars from across the disciplines emphasize the importance of empathy for civil society. In *The Empathic Civilization*, economist and activist Jeremy Rifkin calls for the generating of “global empathy” in order to save the planet from climate change. Cognitive scientist George Lakoff maintains in *The Political Mind* that the success of progressive politics depends on “understand[ing] that our brains evolved for empathy, for cooperation, for connection to each other and to the earth” (267).

Although not everyone agrees about the centrality of empathy to the future of the planet, there is a surprising level of agreement, from educators to politicians and philosophers, and even talk show hosts, that *reading literature* makes us more empathic. This consensus affirms the pedagogy of many teachers of college literature who assign works that broaden students’ understanding of human experience to encourage them to develop empathy for people very different from themselves. Such practices are also at work beyond the English classroom. For the past few decades, for example, many educators in the medical humanities, who typically teach in medical schools

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or centers, have similarly advocated using literary and patient narratives as tools for teaching empathy, self-reflection, and communication to medical students and other practitioners.¹ These scholars and educators maintain that deep engagement with the interior lives of characters, attention to how language and narrative function, and practice reflecting on the ambiguities and uncertainties of other minds and lives may encourage doctors and other practitioners to be more empathic, and thus more effective in treating patients.

Who could object to a pedagogy that seeks to generate empathy? Well, within the academy, a number of prominent post-humanist literary and cultural critics working with affect theory take a strong stance against readerly empathy. They argue that affects such as empathy—as well as love, shame, disgust, terror, and happiness—are more than personal. Such affects have histories and lend force to ideologies, political movements, and cultures. Recent work in affect theory therefore warns us to be wary of the fellow feeling associated with social emotions, such as empathy, sympathy, compassion, and pity.² Although these social emotions may seem authentically personal, we are warned, they can be expressions of power, appropriations of others' experience, and falsely oversimplified understandings of social and cultural relationships. For example, someone might be motivated by empathy to give to a charity that serves hungry people in an impoverished region of the globe, but the satisfaction that comes from this exercise of compassion can conceal from view that the donor's wealth exists only because of others' poverty (Ahmed, "Politics"). Similarly, one may read a novel that portrays the trauma caused by systematic urban violence in an American city and imagine that one understands the experience, but such identification can prevent one from recognizing one's own complicity with the social and political structures that engender this violence. In sum, empathy is dangerous: it placates the privileged and obscures "the cultural politics of emotion" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*).

Clearly there is a gap between literary and medical humanist educators on the one side, and post-humanist affect theorists on the other. This division exists not just because of the tension between their theoretical views, but also, quite simply, because they use the term *empathy* so differently. One group characterizes empathy as the basis of compassionate behavior in institutions and societies, the other as a cultural tool for reinforcing existing structures of power. Is there any hope of bridging this divide or defining an alternative position?

It may appear that new research in cognitive science can resolve the disagreement about empathy's ethics by grounding our understanding of this social emotion in neuroscience rather than culture. In an oft-cited definition, autism researcher Simon Baron-Cohen explains empathy as "the drive to identify another person's emotions and thoughts, and to respond to them with an appropriate emotion" (*Essential Differ-*

ence 2). The word “drive” suggests that empathy is automatic, spontaneous, beyond one’s control, and thus worthy of neither praise nor blame. But Baron-Cohen also uses the word “appropriate,” which suggests that culture is present, too, shaping what it means to respond in a suitable or proper way. The significance of culture and context for empathy is reiterated in recent work by neuroscientists who explain empathic concern as dependent not just on emotion, but also on cognition, context, and the relationship between the empathizer and the object of empathy (Decety and Meyer 1073; Singer and Lamm 89). At the moment, therefore, brain research may provide a new foundation for thinking about empathy, but it does not rescue empathy from moral ambiguity, and it leaves many questions unanswered. We don’t know the extent to which empathic concern is learned. We haven’t confirmed whether it can be taught, as humanist teachers maintain, or unlearned, as post-humanist critics call for. What is clear, however, is that neither of these positions fully acknowledges that empathy—understood as “the drive to identify another person’s emotions and thoughts, and to respond to them with an appropriate emotion”—has both possibilities *and* limits.

In this essay, I discuss the two major camps in the empathy debate in turn. Given the limits of space, I won’t consider all theorists of empathy, just a representative few. In the first section, I survey arguments for teaching empathy through literature; in the second section, I review the work of several affect theorists who are deeply suspicious about the politics of empathy. Each section concludes with a discussion of how the positions under review could more fully address the complexities of social and readerly empathy. I argue that educators need to release their hold on the supposition that reading enriches empathic concern because, in fact, there is little clear evidence that reading changes behavior beyond the private encounter with the book. At the same time, I contend that skeptical critics must question their own conviction that empathic responses to literature are necessarily simplistic and naïve. I then discuss how literary considerations of empathy reveal the limitations of both stances. Lucy Grealy’s memoir *Autobiography of a Face*, for instance, explores the problems of empathy in ways more intellectually complex than literary and medical humanist pedagogies allow, and more nuanced and fundamental to everyday social experience than the affect theorists recognize. Grealy’s meditations on empathy lead me to the final point in my argument: as educators, if we want our students to understand the potential as well as the problems of empathy, we should neither assume students will become attuned to others simply by reading nor insist that readerly empathy is always illegitimate. Instead, we should emphasize that empathy is multidimensional, flawed, fascinating, and inescapably—for better *and* worse—at the heart of social relationships.

THE CALL FOR EMPATHIC READING

Because readers routinely report feeling empathic responses while reading, the widespread assumption that empathy can be taught through books seems reasonable. Think, for instance, of the popularity of Oprah Winfrey's book club. Between 1996 and 2010, the talk show host regularly selected contemporary books, generally fiction, for her viewers to read. She explicitly encouraged them to take a therapeutic approach to reading—to “value novels they can take personally, novels that can speak to, challenge or transform their lives, novels that entertain them with lively stories or call them into political or social awareness, even action” (Harker and Farr 2). To professional critics, the sentimental manner of reading Winfrey advocated, and the confessional discussions that resulted, were simplistic at the very least, and, in the worst instances, actively anti-intellectual (Max; Illouz).

Echoes of Winfrey's beliefs about the function of the literary, however, may be heard in the arguments of some of this country's best-known public philosophers, Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, as well as in the words of President Barack Obama, who identified empathy as the foundation of his moral and political thought in *The Audacity of Hope*. Empathy, in fact, became a term of contention in Washington when Obama, faced with his first nomination to the Supreme Court, announced, “I view that quality of empathy, of understanding and identifying with people's hopes and struggles, as an essential ingredient for arriving at just decisions and outcomes” (“President's Remarks”). These words spurred political furor among legal conservatives who saw empathy as a form of emotionality that precluded reasoned judgment. Writing for the *National Review* after the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor, Wendy Long, a former clerk for Justice Clarence Thomas, responded: “Judge Sotomayor is a liberal judicial activist of the first order who thinks her own personal political agenda is more important than the law as written. She thinks that judges should dictate policy, and that one's sex, race, and ethnicity ought to affect the decisions one renders from the bench.” The assumption here is that empathy is emotional to the exclusion of reason, and that it operates through identification with people who are similar, not different. We have here a classic example of odd bedfellows: conservative legal scholars and post-humanist literary critics find common cause in denouncing the threat empathy poses to the establishment of a just society.

Obama, for his part, supports the position that empathy entails learning about difference and believes that reading itself plays a central role in its development. In a 2007 speech about empathy and literacy, he stated,

The biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit. We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else's shoes and see the world through their eyes. And the great power of books is the capacity to take you out of yourself and put you somewhere else. And to suddenly say, “Oh,

this is what it's like"—maybe not perfectly—but it gives you some glimpse of “This is what it is like to be a woman,” or “This is what it is like to be an African-American.” Or “This is what it is like to be impoverished in India.” Or “This is what it's like to be in the midst of war.” [. . .] And so it's books more than anything else that are going to give our young people the ability to see other people. And that then gives them the capacity to act responsibly with respect to other people. (“Pres. Barack Obama”)

There's a rhetorical rhythm at work here—and, and, or, and—that covers over leaps of logic. Reading may give people glimpses of very different places, cultures, and lives, but just because books *can* do this doesn't mean that they, “more than anything else,” *will* teach young people to feel or act a certain way.

A similar line of reasoning appears in the work of philosophers Nussbaum and Rorty, who both argue that literature helps to cultivate the imagination and thus to create a more compassionate society. In *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum writes that “the habits of wonder promoted by storytelling [. . .] define the other person as spacious and deep, with qualitative differences from oneself and hidden places worthy of respect” (90). Thus, she asserts,

Narrative imagination is an essential preparation for moral interaction. Habits of empathy and conjecture conduce to a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community: one that cultivates a sympathetic responsiveness to another's needs, and understands the way circumstances shape those needs, while respecting separateness and privacy. (90)

In Nussbaum's view, “empathic imagining” (*Poetic Justice* xvi, 68) that is exercised in private reading may be fallible, inconsistent, and incomplete, but it remains “an invaluable way of extending our ethical awareness and of understanding the human meaning of events and policies” (*Cultivating Humanity* 14). Empathy, in her argument, is not a spontaneous reaction, but a habitual practice, cultivated and elevated to the service of citizenship and community.

Like Nussbaum, Rorty maintains in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* that reading literature can train the imagination to understand others despite our differences. He writes that, in a previous era, people would have turned to “the sermon and the treatise,” as “the principal vehicles of moral change and progress” (xvi). He argues that currently,

it is the disciplines which specialize in thick description of the private and idiosyncratic which are assigned this job. In particular, novels and ethnographies which sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job which demonstrations of a common human nature were supposed to do. (94)

In other words, now that there is no accepted universal idea of the “human” or “humanity,” novelists have the responsibility of “help[ing] us attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves as well as to the fact of its occurrence in areas where we had not

noticed it” (95). The social solidarity generated by novels is not the old humanism in disguise, Rorty maintains: “It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers” (xvi).

As avid readers, Rorty, Nussbaum, Obama, and Winfrey all know that books have expanded their cognitive and emotional capacities for understanding others, and they assume this will be the case for other people. Their views demonstrate that the ideal of literary empathy has currency well beyond literature classrooms—indeed, even beyond the traditional humanities. For instance, some medical students encounter the assumption that reading builds empathy when discussions of clinical communication come to the fore. Starting in the 1970s, medical humanists began to draw attention to the presence and value of oral narratives by patients, family members, and practitioners in medical settings.³ Patients’ narratives, in particular, testified to the negative consequences of the biomedical, disease-oriented approach to treatment, which put a greater distance between patients and their physicians—a problem that has been further aggravated during the age of the ten-minute medical appointment. Over the past several decades, this young branch of humanistic study also focused on the growth of the genre of illness memoirs and studied how these narratives function for writers and readers as a corrective to social isolation, stigma, ignorance, and the dehumanization experienced in medical institutions. Out of this context emerges the reasonable belief—metamorphosed into a pedagogical strategy—that future practitioners can become more empathic by reading illness memoirs and other literature.

There is little evidence, though, that reading literature has such effects. In her book *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen reviewed available research in psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience, as well as studies of reading practices, and found no significant studies to support the claim that the private experience of reading—the generation of what she calls *narrative empathy*—makes people more altruistic in everyday life. One problem is that reading practices outside classrooms are very different from those imagined by Obama, Nussbaum, and Rorty. Readers do report that they value the experience of empathy in reading, but they tend to choose books containing characters or plots with which they identify beforehand. On their own, they do not regularly choose reading material that cuts across social and cultural boundaries. In addition, because reading is a private transaction between a reader and a book, readerly empathy differs profoundly from social empathy. When reading for pleasure, we are released from social obligations and need not put up the protective barriers of suspicion or skepticism (Keen 88). Feeling an empathic connection with an autobiographer’s narrative persona, in other words, is a whole lot easier than interacting with her in person. Listening in the social world entails understanding expectations and negotiating responsibilities, neither of which matters as one sits in a quiet corner with a book.

The complications to which Keen draws our attention do not preclude the possibility that classes in literature can rouse empathic feeling and compassionate behavior; rather, they underscore the fact that we don't yet know how to teach the transfer from reading to empathy and then to action. If one wants to foster reading of this kind, designing a genuinely effective pedagogy will not be easy. Consider the challenges of evaluating whether a book or a course has successfully taught students to be more empathic. There are, in fact, accepted scales for assessing the empathy of individuals because of the competency-based assessment used in medical education: the "Empathic Concern Scale" (Davis), the "Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale" (Mehrabian and Epstein), and the "Jefferson Scale for Physician Empathy" (Hojat et al.). Although the existence of these instruments demonstrates that it is possible to develop tests for empathy that meet psychometric standards for reliability and validity, breaking empathy into individual components reduces it in ways that ultimately draw into question what is being assessed (Kuper; Singer and Lamm 92–93). Empathy is not simply a collection of individual components, but a complex and integrated experience and practice that, to date, has defied measurement. It's also impossible to imagine empathy scales being used in literature classrooms—but not because English professors have better ideas about how to assess the quality or depth of the empathy experienced in reading. We tend to respond to such challenges by generating critiques rather than better pedagogy or assessment tools.

THE ARGUMENT FOR SUSPICIOUS CRITICISM

For scholars trained in what Paul Ricoeur called the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, the idea that one can, through reading, try on the experience of another and thereby understand that person's experience cognitively and emotionally is absurdly simplistic. In a critical culture highly attuned to asymmetrical power relations, empathy is not a sanctioned response to literature. Ricoeur coined the phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" in *Freud and Philosophy*, where he wrote that "hermeneutics [. . .] seems to be animated by [a] double motivation: [a] willingness to suspect, [and a] willingness to listen" (27). He discussed suspicion as a counterbalance to phenomenology, but in recent decades, as has been noted by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as well as Bruno Latour and Rita Felski, the hermeneutics of suspicion has become "synonymous with criticism itself" (Sedgwick 124). In critical practice, Sedgwick observes, suspicion about texts' concealed ruptures has become prescriptive (125). Such practices, in her view, seek to anticipate and contain textual and theoretical problems so that "bad news" is always known in advance (130). Thus, before a contemporary critic approaches an autobiography about cancer or pain, she expects to see that the writer's story is shaped by medical discourse, as well as by political, economic, and cultural roles and forces. She knows already that the autobiographer's agency in constructing her

story is an illusion. And at the same time, she knows that readers will appropriate the experience of suffering, or validate medical marketing, or misinterpret profiteering as human kindness. The list of pitfalls for the common reader is a long one.

Among the most influential critics of the enervating political effects of novels and reading practices that generate empathy, sympathy, or other such affects is Raymond Williams, who maintains in *Culture and Society* that common readings of nineteenth-century industrial novels led to a “recognition of evil,” but that this “was balanced by fear of becoming involved.” “Sympathy was transformed,” he writes, “not into action, but into withdrawal” (109). That is, sympathy experienced in the act of reading about the suffering of others privatizes a social emotion, counteracting the motivation for public action.

Williams’s position has been taken up and reaffirmed by critics for four decades. A recent example, Theresa A. Kulbaga’s essay “Pleasurable Pedagogies,” examines the politics of empathy in Azar Nafisi’s international best seller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Nafisi’s memoir describes a two-year period during the repressive regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini when she secretly taught works from the Western literary canon to a small class of Iranian women. In Kulbaga’s view, the empathy Nafisi’s students feel for characters in these books, and the empathy Nafisi’s own readers feel for the students, in turn, confines everyone involved “in the realm of individual imagination, where affect remains divorced from either critical reflection or political action” (517). Empathy, to Kulbaga, is the product of a “neoliberal feminist rhetoric and pedagogy” that Nafisi uses to advance “U.S. nationalist and imperialist fantasies concerning women’s rights and rescue” (511).⁴ Empathy, in other words, covers over a shameful complicity with oppressive practices.

The most influential contemporary theorist to advance such a position is Lauren Berlant, who argues in her essay “Poor Eliza” that there is an ideology of “true feeling” at work in sentimental literature, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, that “cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain” (641). According to Berlant, sentimentality creates the illusion that identification with a person who suffers allows one, through feeling, to transcend structural problems such as racism and sexism. But this is a false transcendence, Berlant tells us, for “witnessing and identifying with pain, consuming and deriving pleasure and moral self-satisfaction” does not change the world (645). The pain that interests Berlant “must be soothed politically.” She objects, therefore, when “the ethical imperative toward social-transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of *empathy*” (emphasis added). When this happens, she maintains, the imperative for public political action is weakened by “private thoughts, leanings, and gestures” (641). Although Berlant doesn’t explicitly define the term *empathy*, she clearly thinks of it in different terms than do Nussbaum and Rorty. Empathy is an unexamined emotional response to the experience of others, a form of false identification and flawed knowledge that disregards distance and difference. Thus,

she argues that, in popular fiction and film, such as the novels *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Bridges of Madison County*, empathy is a product of the story-as-commodity.⁵

Berlant does retain the belief that serious, *unsentimental* literary works can address suffering effectively—but only by refusing the possibility of identification and empathy. She closes “Poor Eliza” by praising Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as an example of such a “postsentimental” text, noting that the author refuses to give its characters or its readers “too-quick gratification over the none-too-brief knowledge of pain” (665). Morrison’s postsentimental choices are evident, Berlant maintains, in how she evokes and reworks elements of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Sethe’s flight from slavery echoes that of “poor Eliza,” who heroically crosses the partially frozen Ohio River while carrying her son by leaping from one slab of ice to the next. Although Sethe crosses the same river with a newborn daughter, Morrison’s novel reveals again and again that neither Sethe’s mind nor her scarred body can fully escape. To Berlant, Sethe’s inability to leave slavery behind underscores that embodied knowledge cannot be passed on through empathy or identification. Sethe’s story, she says, refuses the reader’s fantasy of “tak[ing] on the history of the Other” (666), and she notes that readers will make true political transformation possible only by inhabiting and acting in their own lives.

Given how Berlant represents empathy—as a “civic-minded but passive ideal” and a form of false knowledge—it’s clear how she arrived at the postsentimental argument that *Beloved* refuses empathy (641). Although I agree that literary works like *Beloved*, which are intellectually and aesthetically demanding of readers, disrupt and complicate readers’ identification with characters, Berlant’s interpretation of *Beloved* does not recognize Morrison’s valuable work *with* empathy in the novel. It would be a greater benefit to readers, in my view, to see *Beloved* as part of a continuing cultural conversation about empathy than to relegate the novel to the separate category of postsentimental literature. *Beloved* is many things. It is a ghost story, a fictional slave narrative, and a narrative performance of Faulkner’s famous dictum from *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (535). *Beloved* is also an exploration of empathy’s possibility and necessity, as well as its limits. The narrative is modeled on the story of an escaped slave, Margaret Garner, who murdered her daughter rather than let her be taken into slavery (Byatt vii). Sethe, too, kills her daughter and tries to kill her three other children when she sees her former master, Schoolteacher, approaching her new home in Ohio. In Morrison’s telling, the murdered child, named Beloved, returns as a ghost. Like the crimes of slavery, Beloved won’t stay neatly in the past.

Can readers possibly empathize with Sethe? This is *Beloved*’s essential challenge. Sethe’s history defies empathy for many reasons, most of all for the blood she shed. As the novel unfolds, Morrison reveals how other characters, from Schoolteacher to Sethe’s daughter Denver to her lover Paul D, see Sethe and how they make sense of

what she has done. Critic James Phelan has noted that “Morrison stops short of taking any clear ethical stand on Sethe’s rough choice” (93). Instead, without privileging any single character’s perspective, Morrison “asks us to enter into each character’s consciousness and to recognize the validity of his or her feelings and judgments” (99). One of the extraordinary achievements of the novel is that, by the time Sethe tells her own version of her story, readers have been led to a point where they may be able to feel a wrenching, horrible empathy for this woman who slit her daughter’s throat.

There is nothing easy or quick about how *Beloved* works on and with its readers. Morrison does not allow us to feel that we know Sethe. But her reimagining of Margaret Garner’s story is itself an empathic act, and the fiction she creates invites readers to experience the interplay of connection, distance, and difference, knowing that their understanding will always be incomplete and imperfect. Morrison lets readers gradually assemble an understanding of the conditions under which a mother might make the choice to kill her child. This exercise of empathy—thoughtful, respectful, slow, and aware of distance and constraints—is, in my view, more reflective of experience than affect theorists’ arguments that empathy is always and only self-satisfied and passive; and it is more complex than the empathy that many readers and English educators assume is naturally engendered by literature. Morrison suggests that making the effort to understand is a necessary commitment, even in impossibly complex circumstances. The form of empathy she makes available through her novel, however, is not primarily social, so it can’t be evaluated in terms of its influence on action in the world. She stages an experience for readers, inviting their intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic engagement with the subtleties of human interaction and relationships. She doesn’t redefine empathy as much as she allows it to unfold in time.

COMPLICATING EMPATHY

One might expect that Williams’s and Berlant’s arguments against sympathy and sentimentalism would apply to some texts and genres more than others. Popular illness memoirs, for example, appear vulnerable to critique because their writers often explicitly seek readers’ empathy. It’s a mistake, however, to assume that authors in this genre are necessarily sentimental or simplistic in their engagement with empathy. Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face*, for instance, doesn’t provide the “quick gratification” that so concerns Berlant. In fact, like *Beloved*, it unfolds into an intricate exploration of empathy. The memoir’s starting point is Grealy’s childhood cancer. At age nine, she was diagnosed with Ewing’s sarcoma in her jaw and initiated into a lifetime of surgeries that permanently disfigured her face. The initial operation removed the cancerous bone, leaving Grealy with only half a lower jaw and an oddly triangular face. After the cancer was successfully treated, she underwent thirty-eight reconstructive surgeries in the next two decades to rebuild her jaw line, none of which

was successful. The drama of her medical treatment, however, is of less interest to Grealy than her experience navigating the social world with what she recognizes as an “ugly” face.

Grealy’s autobiography becomes the literary face she turns to her readers in the hope of gaining recognition and acknowledgement. Her self-portrait evokes the Levinasian idea of the face as the foundation of ethics: in order to acknowledge and respond to the face of another, one must see in that face the fragility of the other’s life. Emmanuel Levinas writes that one acts ethically when one chooses to honor rather than to exploit that vulnerability (24–25). Grealy’s readers—because they face a text, not a person—don’t have to negotiate such a high-stakes encounter. In reading her autobiography, one has time for contemplation, rereading, and reflection. There is time for empathy to develop, if Grealy will allow it.

But she doesn’t. Or she doesn’t make empathy easy. Instead, she regularly disrupts the illusion that readers could ever know what it is to *be* her. The book opens and closes, for instance, with meditations about being looked at by others and what they see and fail to see. In the prologue, titled “Pony Party,” Grealy describes her job at age fourteen working at children’s birthday parties, leading weary ponies in a circle as children sit atop them and their parents take pictures. Amid strangers, she had to will herself to ignore, or to appear to ignore, the “open, uncensored stares” of the children that felt even crueler than the insults of the children at school (7). “Not once,” she adds, “in the three or so years that I worked pony parties did anyone ask me directly what had happened” (11). She recognizes that her face made people uncomfortable, but this discomfort doesn’t excuse the fact that no one—adult or child—acknowledged her as a person with a story worth listening to.

Grealy felt alienated even at home, where she could not relax into recognizing familiar others or being recognized in return. On days when she was at home alone during chemotherapy, she wandered into the rooms of her siblings and father and tried to imagine what it was like to be them, to see what the world looked like from their perspectives. But their intimate spaces only revealed their separateness and incomprehensibility. Her older brother’s room, she says, “seemed the most alien of all. Even when I lay down on his bed and saw what he saw, I knew I wasn’t even close” (81). Grealy was also a twin, but after surgery, she and her sister no longer looked the part, their faces and their lives having become so different that neither could recognize herself in the other. Grealy became a patient; her sister became her visitor.

Grealy’s crisis is rooted in her bodily *and* social vulnerability. She depends on how others see her for her sense of self, but experience has shown that her face prevents her from understanding others and others from connecting to her. Thus, at the same time that she seems to show readers who she is and how she feels through her memoir, she tells them that they cannot know her. In the final chapter in the book, “Mirrors,” which takes place after what Grealy hoped would be her final

reconstructive operation, she explains her decision no longer to look in the mirror because whatever face is reflected there will seem like that of an imposter. She decides that avoiding her reflection will enable her to let go of her expectations about her image. The book concludes after she has spent nearly a year carefully avoiding mirrors as well as reflections that “spring up [. . .] at any moment from a glass tabletop, a well-polished door handle, a darkened window, a pair of sunglasses, a restaurant’s otherwise magnificent brass-plated coffee machine sitting innocently by the cash register” (220). In the final scene, she sits in a café with a man she finds attractive and is surprised to realize that, as he looks at her, his demeanor does not reflect back what she calls her “ugliness” (222). Curious, she looks behind him at the “night-silvered glass reflecting the entire café” to see if she can, at last, recognize herself (223). The book ends there. Grealy does not tell us what she sees.

Interpreting *Autobiography of a Face* has become even more complicated since Grealy died in December 2002 of a heroin overdose. That her death appears to have been accidental does not erase evidence that she was depressed and suicidal. For years, she had been spiraling downward, blocked as a writer, helplessly in debt, and using heroin with greater frequency. Knowing Grealy’s fate in advance inevitably alters the way new readers receive her story. Now evident in her memoir is a subtext about mental illness and addiction. Later editions of the book contain an afterword by her friend, the novelist Ann Patchett, that is part exposition, part elegy, and part argument. Patchett tells readers not to be distracted from Grealy’s art by her death: “she wanted us to learn not only about the facts but also about their abstraction, to think beyond what we already know” (233). Patchett’s afterword later grew into a book, *Truth and Beauty*, a memoir of their friendship that offers a much grittier picture of Grealy’s unfulfilled search for unconditional acceptance. If Patchett’s book portrays a mutual friendship that is generous and forgiving, it also demonstrates, without a doubt, the limits of friendship and recognition: Patchett could not save Grealy. In fact, Grealy’s death underscores the tragic consequences of the limits of empathy.

Grealy’s desire to hold readers’ empathy in check is made explicit in an anecdote Patchett relays in both her afterword and *Truth and Beauty*. At readings and book signings, readers wanted Grealy to be “a role model for overcoming obstacles” (Afterword 230; *Truth and Beauty* 141) or a confessor for their own “report[s] from the suffering sweepstakes” (*Truth and Beauty* 142). At such events, when the floor opened to questions from the audience, more often than not, people told their own stories about cancer. Grealy, however, “refused to let the evening digress into a litany of battle stories” and always moved quickly to the next question without comment (Afterword 230; *Truth and Beauty* 141). One evening, a woman with “her head wrapped in a bright scarf”—presumably to conceal the hair loss that can occur with chemotherapy—asked Grealy if, while writing her memoir, she “ever worried that [she] might get something wrong.” Grealy deflected the question because it presumed

her memoir was a record of events rather than a literary creation, saying, “I didn’t remember it. [. . .] I wrote it. I’m a writer” (Afterword 231; *Truth and Beauty* 141). Both Grealy and Patchett clearly felt that these fans wanted the wrong thing from *Autobiography of a Face*: despite how Grealy’s story complicates empathy, readers still wanted to identify with her suffering and to find some part of their own stories in hers.

This particular struggle over how to read Grealy’s book is an example of failed empathy on everyone’s part. The readers ignore Grealy when they read her memoir only as a story of triumph over cancer and miss her artful efforts to shape an unavoidable, unpredictable, and unwelcome experience into meaningful narrative. Grealy and Patchett, in turn, shut out the reader who seeks companionship because they want to protect Grealy’s status as a literary writer. It may be that Grealy “was a serious writer, and she wanted her book to be judged for its literary merit and not its heart-breaking content,” but writers don’t get to dictate why readers choose books, how they read, or why they fall in love with one book rather than another (Afterword 230; *Truth and Beauty* 141). At Grealy’s reading, where one might expect the connection between reader and writer to be at its greatest because they are in the same room and linked to one another through a common text, empathy is disrupted in every direction—except for Patchett’s empathy for Grealy as a writer with a fragile ego.

Fortunately, Patchett’s accounts of empathy extend beyond its failures. The primary focus of her memoir is the deep friendship she and Grealy share, and she makes clear that there are possibilities in social and readerly connection—moments of truth and beauty—that are worth striving for. Empathy is not salvation; it’s not certainty or knowledge; it blurs boundaries in ways that can be both generative and destructive. In the end, empathy is a *practice*, a process that extends in time. To make it work takes both effort and humility.

THE PRACTICE OF READING

In my discussion of Morrison and Grealy, I’ve attended to how the literary can represent, stage, elicit, disrupt, or block empathy. Empathy certainly presents a problem in both *Beloved* and *Autobiography of a Face*, but the authors, rather than seeking to solve the problem once and for all, invite readers to consider the ambiguities of social experience. With such sophisticated engagements with empathy readily available, why do arguments that represent empathy as either redeeming or oppressive hold so much sway? These opposed positions are so compelling, I believe, because they affirm the social and political value of literature and criticism at a time when their status is diminishing both in the academy and in society at large. Proponents from both sides agree that there are important, real-world consequences for reading and criticism. As we have seen, teachers of literature, including medical humanists, claim that reading will nurture empathy, making college students and medical practitioners more humane. Affect theorists argue that the work of the critic is to counter the

anesthetizing effects of empathy generated through naïve reading so that readers can see injustice more clearly and, it is implied, act to correct it. Although these critics disagree about the cultural politics of empathy, they are united in the belief that the study of literature matters.

And it does matter, but not precisely for either of the reasons on offer, nor for the reasons proposed by the new field of cognitive literary studies. In *Why We Read Fiction*, critic Lisa Zunshine writes that one of the primary pleasures of reading fiction is to observe how characters read and misread one another's interior states. From this claim, Zunshine builds an argument about the innate appeal of fiction based on research about a concept related to empathy—*Theory of Mind*—which cognitive scientist Baron-Cohen calls “mind-reading” (*Mindblindness*). The term Theory of Mind refers to a set of neurological functions that, according to some cognitive scientists, enable people to explain the behavior of others in terms of their underlying thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires, and thus to traverse the social environment (Carruthers and Smith 4).

Theory of Mind is typically tested in children over age three by seeing if they are able to recognize that someone holds a false belief. Imagine, for instance, that it is lunchtime. A colleague walks out of the common room to make a phone call, leaving his lunch bag on a table, and you see someone reach in and steal his chocolate bar. If you have functional Theory of Mind, you can predict that, when your colleague returns to the room, he will falsely believe the candy is still there. You can also be quite certain that he will be surprised, annoyed, and perhaps angry that it is gone. If you don't have functional Theory of Mind, you won't be able to predict your colleague's feelings or understand that he might hold a false belief. Although Theory of Mind allows most of us to anticipate and recognize the mental and emotional states of others, it is by no means infallible. When we have to interpret feelings and unspoken thoughts in complex social circumstances, we're likely to make mistakes. This challenge has interested novelists for generations, and the intersection of literature and Theory of Mind fascinates Zunshine.

Zunshine's initial claim is that fiction experiments with and puts on display elements of social behavior that have been explained in new ways by cognitive science. Then, however, she makes a riskier assertion—that reading fiction is rewarding *because* it “engages, teases, and pushes to its tentative limits our mind-reading capacity.” The implication here brings us full circle, back to the humanist educators who teach literature because it stimulates empathy. Literature, Zunshine hypothesizes, both satisfies and creates “cognitive cravings” (4). She concludes, therefore, that we read fiction for the pleasure we get from exercising, extending, and becoming aware of our Theory of Mind. Unfortunately, Zunshine speeds ahead of current neurological research both when she implies, with the repeated use of the terms *exercise* and *workout*, that there is a cognitive benefit to reading fiction, and when she assumes that Theory of Mind has a verifiable role in how or why we read. There will come a day

when neuroscientists know more about what happens when we read and empathize, but at this point, we just don't know enough about the reading and mind-reading brain to confirm Zunshine's claims.

In bringing my own consideration of empathy to a close, I want to make a more modest claim about empathy, literature, and criticism. The work of writers such as Morrison and Grealy stands, in my view, as a counterexample to arguments that literature and criticism matter *because* they have the power to reform readers' thoughts and behavior in particular ways. The novel and memoir both suggest that the lived complexity of empathy cannot be reduced to an outcome to be assessed, a feeling to be argued out of, or a neurological response. For these writers, empathy is instead an inexhaustible subject for the practices of contemplation, exploration, and creation. Literature matters, their work suggests, not because it changes our brains, hearts, souls, or political convictions, but because the practice of reading literature slows thought down. In a hurried age, and with the constant distractions provided by instantly available entertainment, a book provides a rare opportunity for sustained focus, contemplation, and introspection. Literary critics and educators can encourage readers to take advantage of the invitation to dwell in uncertainty and to explore the difficulties of knowing, acknowledging, and responding to others. In the end, however, it's the reader's choice.

We're using an ill-fitting framework if we seek to justify the place of literary study in higher education by arguing that reading must result in empathy or activism. Those aren't standards we can consistently satisfy. The study of literature is not a quick fix if our goal is for students to become more humane and thoughtful about others. Students are more likely to develop these traits if such behavior is a visible and pervasive practice in the institutions where they learn and work. So, rather than assess literary study on the basis of whether it teaches a certain type of behavior, what if we assessed the integrity of our institutions and communities by whether they make time for the kind of self- and community-sustaining practices long made available by the arts and literature? If respectful, thoughtful, and humane ways of being, thinking, and acting are valued elements of institutional culture, then we will have, at the very least, created the conditions where students can both be introduced to the complexity of empathy and experience it as a daily practice.

NOTES

1. Among the many works that have contributed to the pedagogical scholarship in literature and medicine or narrative medicine are Charon; Charon and Montello; Charon et al.; Hawkins; Hunter, Charon, and Coulehan; McLellan and Jones; Shapiro; and Trautmann. For a collection of more than forty syllabi for courses in literature and medicine, see New York University's *Medical Humanities* website (<http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/syllabi.for.web/syl.lit.medicine.html>). For more general discussions of teaching empathy in medical schools, see Halpern; Spiro; and Stepien and Baernstein. For a nuanced consideration of the challenges of empathy in medical settings, see Garden.

2. See Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and *The Promise of Happiness*; Berlant's *The Female Complaint*, in addition to her edited volume *Compassion*; and the collections edited by Gregg and Seigworth and by Clough.

3. The foundational texts regarding the importance of narrative in relation to illness include Brody; Charon; Frank; Hawkins; Hunter; Kleinman; Mattingly; and Morris.

4. For counterarguments see Lundeen; Lynch.

5. Berlant's argument resists Jane Tompkins's efforts to redeem sentimentalism and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. For a more recent analysis of the affective force of Stowe's novel, see Bracher.

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