

Komparatistik

Jahrbuch
der Deutschen Gesellschaft
für Allgemeine und Vergleichende
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AISTHESIS VERLAG

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von Annette Simonis, Martin Sexl und Alexandra Müller

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Dennis Friedrichsen

Evoking empathy in Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*

More and more research is shedding light on the relationship between reading, emotions and empathy.¹ What positive aspects do we gain from reading? This question implies philosophical and anthropological issues. Currently, it can also be considered a challenge, offering a possible response to the accusation that the humanities are useless, and that (the study of) literature is, at best, a pleasurable pastime activity. Work by scholars such as Suzanne Keen in narrative empathy² may serve as a logical starting point, not least since arguments in favor of empathy specifically highlight how empathy can be an evolutionary tool for survival, a key for inter-human understanding, a precondition for moral action and judgment, and a tool in non-violent conflict resolution. The uses seem many, but how does reading fiction influence our capacity for empathy? Neuroscience and psychology have been unlikely but efficient allies in the quest for understanding the value of empathy, as seen in e. g. Kidd & Castano's *Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind* (2013)³. The object of this paper, then, is to further understand how reading literature increases capacity for empathy, and how narratives positively influence human beings. This will be done via a close reading of China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* with particular focus on the character Yagharek whose tragic situation and journey provides a starting point for a discussion about empathy. The question is whether speculative fiction can be *more* capable of triggering empathy than other genres. In my analysis I will demonstrate the ways in which fantasy literature creates an effective distance to the real world in order to negotiate complicated issues of morality, ethics and empathy.

In this paper, I want to explore the ways in which literature can trigger reflection upon ethical issues and enhance the capacity for empathy. What role does literature play in human development of emotions? It is occasionally loosely claimed that engaging with narrative fiction makes a person more sensitive to the emotions of others although it still remains somewhat unclear how this manifests itself and what it represents.⁴ The link between cognitive abilities

1 See for instance: Jerome Bruner. "The Narrative Construction of Reality". "Critical Inquiry" 18 (1) (1991) : pp. 1-21, and, Michael Fischer. "Literature and Empathy." *Philosophy and Literature* 41.2 (2017) : pp. 431-464.

2 Suzanne Keen. "A Theory of Narrative Empathy." *Narrative*. Vol. 14, no. 3, 2006, pp. 207-236 and S. Keen. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Compare also S. Keen. "Empathy in Reading – Considerations of Gender and Ethnicity". *Anglistik* 24.2 (2013).

3 See David Comer Kidd, Emanuele Castano. "Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind". *Science* (2013), pp. 377-380.

4 See Katrina Fong et al. "What You Read Matters – The Role of Fiction Genre in Prediction Interpersonal Sensitivity". *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts* 7.4 (2013), p. 374.

and reading has been of academic interest for some time now, and particularly theory of mind (ToM) and empathy are in the foreground of the debate. Vera Nünning elaborates on this in *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds* (2013), stating that theory of mind and empathy, “are of crucial importance for learning, living and acting together in complex societies”.⁵ Understanding and appreciating literature generally requires a range of responses that need to be acknowledged, and empathetic responses constitute one corner of a larger canvas. It is an interesting fact that humans generally (and cross-culturally) spend a lot of time on fiction and enjoy immersing themselves in fictitious worlds. Rita Felski in *Uses of Literature* (2008) discusses the generative properties of literature, and details four consequences of reading. While all Felski’s four chapters on Recognition, Enchantment, Knowledge and Shock are valuable, I want to focus particularly on her ideas on *knowledge*. Literature possesses a special knowledge that has potential for influencing emotions, and Felski’s understanding of knowledge presents literary works as being able to provide a kind of phenomenological or experiential knowledge that cannot be provided by other kinds of knowledge-producing enterprises such as science or philosophy. Felski argues that literature reveals something about the way things *are*, and elaborates on the mimesis as metaphor notion borrowed from Paul Ricoeur. Briefly speaking, the argument is that the world is *prefigured* by discourse, and literary texts *configure* this discursive material, which lastly *transfigures* the reader who then restarts the process through their discourse. As such, this type of knowledge gained by reading imparts a deeper sense of everyday experiences and the shape of social life, and is also closely linked to the theory of mind and capacity for empathy, and I doubt Felski would object to my placing empathy within what she calls “social knowledge”.⁶ We cannot improve theory of mind without gaining new *knowledge*, and the experimental knowledge gained directly affects theory of mind and narrative competence. Additionally, part of the power of literature lies in its access to the inner minds of the characters as well as the potential for heteroglossia which readers must digest; as readers become exposed to various characters and their actions and opinions, readers automatically reflect and form opinions. Eileen John writes more on this, stating, “literary works can put into words what these imagined people perceive, think, feel and do, thus granting us access to their experiences and enabling us to give uptake to their perspectives”.⁷

In her introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Empathy*, Heidi L. Maibom describes two common types of empathy: cognitive empathy and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy is the ability to ascribe mental states to others, including beliefs, intentions and emotions, and affective empathy

5 Vera Nünning. *Reading fictions, changing minds. The cognitive value of fiction*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2014 (Schriften des Marsilius-Kollegs, Band 11), p. 10.

6 Rita Felski. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, p. 104.

7 Eileen John. “Empathy in literature”. *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy* (2017). Ed. Heidi L. Maibom. London: Routledge, 2017, p. 306-316, p. 311.

involves affect on the part of the empathizer.⁸ Affect-responses can include sympathy, empathic anger and contagious joy.⁹ Answering the question of how (if at all) art influences our capacity for complex emotions may entail employing methodologies from different academic fields. We may focus on evolutionary biology, neuro-humanities, philosophy, ethics, etc – there are multiple avenues from which to discuss the problem. In this literary analysis paper, I want to look at a specific character from China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000) and argue how our engagement with that character may heighten our capacity for empathy and challenge the way we experience emotions. *Perdido Street Station* features a cast of exotic, strange characters that are realized in an evocative, weird and eloquent setting which here serves as the foundation for my argument. The character I want to focus on, Yagharek, is a difficult and tragic entity and therefore an ideal object of analysis in the context of empathy. Narratives are effective at dealing with topics that readers are concerned with exactly because aesthetically condensed worlds synthesize both particular and general encounters in a convincing and effective manner. Furthermore, ethical, social, cultural and political issues raised in fiction are not less potent though the narrative is fictitious – rather, such issues are effectively explored in fiction because multiple readers share the same experience. This provides an effective context for discussing difficult problems and experimenting with new points of view and emotions.

Identifying positively with a fictional character is generally an important part of reading, but immersion goes deeper than that; especially characters who challenge our worldviews and navigate a moral grey zone, or even characters with an entirely different moral codex (as we shall see), are powerful textual catalysts behind fiction's influence on readers. The immersion in a storyworld can serve as a basis for thinking, knowing, and understanding, for seeking the self and encountering the "Other".¹⁰ What, then, do we gain from reading such stories? Nünning goes on to describe the role of fiction: "Reading fiction, philosophers like Martha Nussbaum¹¹ assert, fulfils important functions both for the individual and for society. It helps to develop prosocial attitudes, ultimately making us better citizens; it affects our sympathy and engages our imaginative abilities."¹²

One of the positive powers of literature is exactly its potential for taking readers out of themselves and forcing them to deal with complicated situations. In literature, as in real life, people can only act and react according to the information available. Literature seems especially potent at subverting expectations and thereby (perhaps sometimes unintentionally) putting readers in situations

8 Heidi L. Maibom. "Introduction to philosophy of empathy", *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*. edited by Heidi L. Maibom, London, New York: Routledge, 2017, p. 1-7, p. 1.

9 Heidi L. Maibom. "Affective empathy". *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy* (annotation 8), p. 22-32, p. 22.

10 See Bruner (annotation 1).

11 See Martha Nussbaum. *Poetic Justice*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995. See also Nussbaum. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.

12 Nünning (annotation 5), p. 102.

where ingrained ways of thinking are challenged, and otherness is recognized as a viable mode of existence. There seems to be a strong element of persuasive power in literature which is arguably enhanced in fiction by the fact that readers engage with their texts willingly and without conscious bias. Even casual observation of human history will reveal that humans seem unwilling to accept major personal, political or cultural differences; this insight makes the claim that literature affects cognitive abilities and enables readers to understand and accept otherness more relevant. Furthermore, in face-to-face social interactions, emotions occur in bouts, and the underlying subconscious mechanisms that fuel interpersonal communication are profoundly complicated; in literature the process is still complicated, but also quite different:

First, reading fiction usually involves a longer exposure to empathetic responses than in real-life experiences [...]. When reading fiction, we remain an – albeit anything but passive – observer; for hours at a stretch, readers' or viewers' empathic reactions are allowed to continue without any disturbance from the outside.¹³

Without any chance to interfere, readers are subject to the choices, dialogue, events and (emotional) responses that characters experience, and this has lasting impact on readers if they are continually exposed to reading fiction. This is closely connected with otherness and learning to empathize and sympathize with groups who are in some ways “other” from the reader, be it in connection with sexuality, race, age, etc, and therefore has clear prosocial consequences: “it [reading fiction] can help readers to understand and share emotions of characters who are very different from themselves”.¹⁴ This is relevant in the case of Yagharek in *Perdido Street Station* because he is different in several ways. We first have to factor in Miéville’s boundless creativity and his association to what is generally called the New Weird literary movement; his texts, although often placed within the speculative fiction genre, are by no means conventional, and especially *Perdido Street Station* features a large cast of strange and weird characters that are hard to do justice in a few words. Yagharek is a so-called *garuda*, a nomad bird-like humanoid race from Cymek. Cymek is far away from New Crobuzon where *Perdido Street Station* takes place, and Yagharek has traveled far to seek out Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin, a rogue scientist, in hopes that Isaac will help Yagharek to fly again. Yagharek, as punishment for something yet to be revealed, has had his wings (and therefore a major part of his identity) sawed off. The reader’s relationship to Yagharek is one of pity at first – he seems a despondent and laconic individual desperate for Isaac’s help: “I have crawled like vermin from hole to hole for a fortnight. I have sought journals and gossip and information, and it led me to Brock Marsh. And in Brock Marsh it led me to you. [...] ‘I have some gold. I will interest you. Pity me. I beg you to help me.’”¹⁵

13 Ibid., p. 102.

14 Ibid., p. 103.

15 China Miéville. *Perdido Street Station*. New York: Ballantine Del Rey, 2000, p. 113.

For this paper I also used an online version of the book which explains the oddly

As such, our first encounter with Yagharek results in pity and a morbid curiosity. What could he possibly have done to have his wings sawed off? It is an intentional textual gap that both (almost incidentally) drives the narrative forward, but also one that will eventually present a moral challenge. This gap is often referred to as the curiosity cue, and posits how such cues drive readers to read on and learn more. If a character and setting are compelling enough, the effect of the curiosity cue is naturally increased, and Yagharek does indeed present an interesting story. The sadness and wonder increase as Yagharek uncovers himself and shows his embarrassing secret:

Yagharek unclipped his cloak and threw it away across the floor. He stared at Isaac with shame and defiance. Isaac gasped. Yagharek had no wings. Strapped across his back was an intricate frame of wooden struts and leather straps that bobbed idiotically behind him as he turned. Two great carved planks sprouted from a kind of leather jerkin below his shoulders, jutting way above his head, where they hinged and dangled down to his knees. They mimicked wing-bones. There was no skin or feathers or cloth or leather stretched between them, they were no kind of gliding apparatus. They were only a disguise, a trick, a prop on which to drape Yagharek's incongruous cloak, to make it seem as if he had wings. Isaac reached out for them. Yagharek stiffened, then steeled himself and let Isaac touch them.¹⁶

As we can see, both Yagharek's own dialogue as well as the narration paints the character in an unfavorable, disheartening light. It is clear that both textual levels are employed with the same purpose in mind because the reader-response to Yagharek and his situation is crucial for the curiosity cue. We are also early on faced with Yagharek's conflicting emotions: shame, defiance, hesitation, all pronounced by the awkward apparatus he strapped to his back in an attempt to hide his missing wings. As such, both in Yagharek's dialogue and in the narrative descriptions, a sense of empathy is evoked. Indeed, the story might fall flat if Yagharek fails to inspire at least a degree of curiosity. When Yagharek attempts to describe why his wings have been sawed off, he is embarrassed and unable to satisfactorily explain why he was punished so severely.

'There...was a madness...I was mad. I committed a heinous act, a heinous act...' His words broke down into avian moans. 'What did you do?' Isaac steeled himself to hear of some atrocity. 'This language cannot express my crime. In my tongue...' Yagharek stopped for a moment. 'I will try to translate. In my tongue they said... they were right...I was guilty of choice-theft...choice-theft in the second degree... with utter disrespect.'¹⁷

Not only are readers presented with a different race/species, but also with a language-culture that is different enough that even seemingly simple explanations

large page count. It is available here: http://ebooksbeus.weebly.com/uploads/6/3/0/8/6308108/perdido_street_station_-_china_mieville.pdf.

16 Ibid., p. 114.

17 Ibid., p. 118.

become difficult. Yagharek is clearly uncomfortable talking about what happened, but it is even more telling that the explanation of “choice-theft” (which sounds vague to us) to him apparently is self-explanatory, while both Isaac and the reader are left wondering. When it is ultimately revealed that Yagharek is guilty of what we would call rape, the reader is forced to review their opinion of Yagharek both based on what has transpired in the narrative and based on their own worldview. This also showcases empathy as a process – readers experience an emotional reaction to something that happens to someone else, which is later transformed by the particular proclivities and attitudes of the empathizer¹⁸. In the beginning of the story, we are presented with an example of a cross-cultural meeting made difficult due to language barriers and different understandings of morality. Miéville’s works generally feature a high degree of invention and secondariness, and it is worth investigating the relationship between this type of fiction, imagination and empathy. As the degree of secondariness increases, so does the importance of immersion and imagination – otherwise we simply cannot keep up with the narrative: “The importance of both narrative and the imagination for prompting empathic feelings suggests that there is a close link between reading fiction, which requires imagining the story world and the characters populating it, and empathy”.¹⁹

Ability to accept the strange or the weird in fiction may be linked to a higher degree of empathy and willingness to accept different kinds of otherness in real life. It goes beyond willing suspension of disbelief; it is a matter of placing the self in relation to others and understanding both our own and others’ place in the world. Furthermore, comprehending both fictional worlds and characters, and comprehending real people, depends on at least a degree of empathy. Some studies²⁰ with children even conclude that there is a relationship between empathizing with fictional characters and understanding the narrative. Here, empathy, which is understood as *feeling like*, is different from sympathy, which is *feeling for*²¹ and this is a relevant distinction to make if we are to appreciate empathy as a unique and lasting result of engaging with literature. Reading can provide access to a range of different emotions, and Nünning elaborates to show how fiction can bring forth emotions and be rewarding as a process:

One of the privileges of fiction lies in the possibility of providing more or less immediate and detailed insight into the mental processes of characters and narrators. Fictional stories can allow readers to become aware of, observe and share

18 Maibom (annotation 8), p. 26.

19 Nünning (annotation 5), p. 104.

20 See Ralf Schneider. “Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character – The Dynamics of Mental-Mode Construction”. *Style* 35.4 (2001), and, David Miall. “Enacting the Other – Towards an Aesthetics of Feeling in Literary Reading”. *The Aesthetic Mind – Philosophy and Psychology*. Ed. Elisabeth Schellekens and Pater Goldie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

21 See Suzanne Keen. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, and S. Keen. “Empathy in Reading – Considerations of Gender and Ethnicity”. *Anglistik* 24.2 (2013).

nuances of emotions of narrators and characters. Readers also become aware of the simultaneity of different feelings within the same characters, which are frequently torn between discrepant and even contradictory feelings. More often than not, readers get the chance to recognize feelings the respective characters are not even aware of.²²

This is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the mental process of Yagharek and his situation forces a reader to look beyond herself exactly because Yagharek is different from any human, both physically and mentally. A reader cannot appreciate or understand such a character without consciously empathizing with the character and his situation, hereby directly employing and practicing theory of mind abilities. Yagharek indeed has this feeling-simultaneity: he is anxious to get his ability to fly back, but also deeply ashamed of what happened that resulted in his wings being sawed off; he is eager to befriend Isaac and embrace New Crobuzon (which we learn that he has read about), but fearful of the city and its culture. Nünning elaborates on how interacting with a character's emotions may be beneficial, and I argue that particularly cases like Yagharek, who are physically, mentally and culturally distinct and in all likelihood very different from the reader, are potent starting points:

By presenting characters with their respective desires, goals and emotions, and by showing how characters interact and how conflicts develop, fiction provides a second-order representation and interpretation of emotions. Literary works not only present individual characters in the throes of their feelings, they also show how other characters understand and misinterpret the feelings of others. Highlighting the dynamics of emotional engagement between several characters, fictional stories display expressions and interpretations of emotions. They stage understandings as well as misunderstandings, thus showing how (not) to interpret gestures or speech acts in a given situation.²³

The experiences of others must be viewed in relation to our own experiences; i. e. our ability to understand emotions and actions of other people depends on our own frame of reference, and reading fiction is effective at presenting vicarious experiences that expose readers to new knowledge and thereby (at best) broadens their horizon through phenomenological experimentation. This is also a large part of what makes reading an interactive experience, although this interactive exchange often happens on a subconscious level. As we digest and interpret what happens in a narrative, the inner mechanisms that drive interpretation and put the story in context are not in the foreground of our conscious mind: "Fiction thus enables readers to vicariously experience how other people may feel and think, and makes it easier to draw inferences in real-life situations which have significant similarities to those encountered in fiction."²⁴

22 Nünning (annotation 5), p. 109.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

These inferences are crucial, and while fiction's ability to put readers in new situations is vital for its power to influence, it is still necessary that there are recognizable elements on both story and character levels. While speculative fiction generally needs elements that are recognizable if the storyworld and narrative are to make sense, even if these are wildly creative and firmly placed within either science-fiction, fantasy or similar genres, neither storyworld nor emotions must become incomprehensible or entirely illogical. Furthermore, as Nünning also points out, fiction has strong potential for exposing readers to characters who seem strange but whose motivations, thoughts and feelings may ultimately be where a reader can empathize with the character:

While it is comparatively easy to understand others who are similar to oneself, fictional stories can make it possible to share the thoughts and feelings of extraordinary characters that appear to be strange to readers.²⁵

In the case of Yagharek, he is a morally and physically complicated character who by the end becomes difficult to empathize with. Yagharek being different and complex is exactly why empathizing with him is difficult but also a rewarding experience, even if a reader's ultimate opinion is not favorable in the end.

While nonfictional and factual works offer precise content that might differ significantly from fiction, the advantage of fiction lies in its multiplicity; the ability to present scenarios that have a causal relationship coupled with the complexities of emotional human behavior is an effective framework for studying human behavior. In other words, here lies the potential for narrative competency and theory of mind development. For example, the stoic work by Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, offers a hands-on philosophy on how to cope with what Aurelius perceived to be common challenges man faces in his attempts at self-improvement and overcoming the weaknesses of the self. The applicability of such philosophy might be reduced by its intangible nature, however, whereas characters in fiction (who may *embody* Aurelius' philosophy) provide a valuable scenario where a reader can follow thought-processes, evolution of ideas and consequences of actions, and hereby conceive of his or her own opinions based on the character-driven narrative. Eileen John touches on this, stating that, "Literary works can put into words what these imagined people perceive, think, feel and do, thus granting us access to their experiences and enabling us to give uptake to their perspectives"²⁶. This notion, coupled with the active and creative gap-filling process of reading, enhances the imagination and understanding of the human condition in various scenarios that a reader is not familiar with. It is for these reasons that a work such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* is useful for learning about the Great War and may therefore, in some ways and to some extent, be more useful than a nonfiction book full

²⁵ Ibid., p. 168.

²⁶ John (annotation 7), p. 311.

of the objective facts of the war.²⁷ This is exactly the type of experimental or phenomenological knowledge that Felski references. Understanding narratives is a complex endeavor, and cognitive abilities are in constant development: "[...] cognition is not a passive recording or imprinting on the psyche but an active selecting, ordering, and shaping of material, a means of making intelligible"²⁸. In our present case with Yagharek, readers stand by and must react, without a chance to intervene, as we learn more about Yagharek and his past. When his ultimate crime is revealed, readers are forced to employ theory of mind skills and inwardly reflect on his behavior since an immediate physical reaction is not possible. In other words, when we learn the reprehensible truth of Yagharek's actions, readers cannot weigh in on how Isaac and other characters must react – the only thing readers can do is reflect, speculate and contemplate the dynamics of the situation. Miéville provokes a deeper reflection of the rape-issue by reframing it as "choice-theft" and makes it clear that taking away someone's choice is the worst thing a garuda can do. Isaac does not learn what this "choice-theft" entails until late in the story, and when he does, it is from a visit by another garuda, Kar'uchai, who asks Isaac not to help Yagharek fly again because the garuda community judged Yagharek to be guilty. They feel that the punishment fits the crime. Isaac is torn because at this point, Yagharek has proven himself a friend and even saved Isaac's life. In terms of theory of mind, in the character of Yagharek we are presented with a different cultural frame by which we are enabled to understand his actions and motivations, but also necessarily made to evaluate them. If we must appreciate choice-theft as a garuda-specific cultural issue, it is equally important to consider the punishment and the issue of rape from a garuda – i. e. a non-human – perspective. This is further complicated by the lack of available information on garuda culture, but nevertheless constructs a situation where theory of mind skills must actively be used to understand the narrative and the dilemmas in the narrative. Finally, Isaac and the readers are confronted with the truth:

"What did he do?" said Isaac, defeated. "He is guilty," said Kar'uchai quietly, "of choice-theft in the second degree, with utter disrespect." "What does that mean?" shouted Isaac. "What did he do? What's fucking choice-theft anyway? This means nothing to me." "It is the only crime we have, Grimneb'lin," replied Kar'uchai in a harsh monotone. "To take the choice of another...to forget their concrete reality, to abstract them, to forget that you are a node in a matrix, that actions have consequences. We must not take the choice of another being. What is community but a means to...for all we individuals to have...our choices."²⁹

This explanation, however, is still considerably abstract. Therefore Isaac fails to understand it, and becomes exasperated. Kar'uchai simply and dispassionately

27 Naturally fiction and nonfiction serve different purposes, and in many scenarios the objectivity of factual nonfiction is more useful, but the argument here is made in the context of theory of mind and narrative competence.

28 Felski (annotation 6), p. 84.

29 Miéville (annotation 15), p. 1504.

says that, “You would call it rape”, and Miéville goes to some lengths to establish garuda culture and ways of thinking as different from humans’, and when it is revealed that Kar’uchai was the victim of Yagharek’s crime, Isaac must face a harsh truth about his friend.

“He stole choice,” she said flatly. “He raped you,” he said, and instantly Kar’uchai clucked again. “He stole my choice,” she said. She was not expanding on his words, Isaac realized: she was correcting him. “You cannot translate into your jurisprudence, Grimneb’lin,” she said. She seemed annoyed. Isaac tried to speak, shook his head miserably, stared at her and again saw the crime committed, behind his eyes. “You cannot translate, Grimneb’lin,” Kar’uchai repeated. “Stop. I can see...all the texts of your city’s laws and morals that I have read...in you.” Her tone sounded monotonous to him.³⁰

Although Miéville presents a situation different from many cases humans experience, the issue at hand – choice-theft, or rape – is universally recognizable. While this paper is not about the issue of rape, it nevertheless serves as a vehicle for the overarching argument, namely that fiction exposes readers to new situations and forces them to consider the characters and their thoughts in a passive manner. This, then, promotes the particular kind of *knowledge* that literature may impart, not least because it is free from the impulsive emotional decisions a reader may make in non-reading situations: “Looking at the potential of narratives as text types, it is productive to consider narratives as means of generating and spreading knowledge about the actions and experiences of human beings.”³¹ Yagharek embodies precisely what Nünning here talks about, as he both spreads knowledge and generates new experiences, even if it happens on an abstract level. While a reader may have felt a strong degree of empathy with Yagharek in the beginning of the narrative, it is likely that reader perception and opinion of him changes at this point, even if both victim and perpetrator repeatedly stress how “choice-theft” in garuda culture is different from “rape” in human culture. As far as the beginning of *Perdido Street Station* is concerned, Maibom’s characterization of affective empathy is useful. While Maibom details several categories of affective empathy, I want to focus on her first characterization: “Person *S* empathizes with person *O*’s experience of emotion *E* in situation *C* if *S* feels *E* for *O* as a result of believing or perceiving that *O* feels *E*, or imagining being in *C*.”³² The reader (*S*) sympathetically empathizes with Yagharek’s (*O*) experience of loss of identity and distress (*E*) after being physically punished (*C*). What I want to stress, however, is the experimental knowledge obtained after dealing with the progression of emotions attached the Yagharek and his situation; the term “theft” suggests actions that are of a minor consequence to the reader, and Yagharek’s punishment may therefore seem disproportionate. The fact that Yagharek may be a thief is not an obstacle for empathetic involvement with the character, but after readers learn the truth of Yagharek’s choice-theft

30 Ibid., p. 1509.

31 Nünning (annotation 5), p. 150.

32 Maibom (annotation 8), p. 2.

crime, readers employ cognitive empathy in order to consider the perspectives of both Yagharek and Kar'uchai; perpetrator and victim. Without narrative competence, understanding of the narrative on any level is lost. Furthermore, person *S* (the reader) will undergo a process and might change stance – instead of pity and empathy, an appropriate response to Yagharek is antipathy. This still depends on theory of mind, but less on empathy for *O* (Yagharek) but instead of another new element in the equation, *M* (Kar'uchai), who is the catalyst behind the shift in empathy position. This shift is both sudden and important, especially because it occurs late in the narrative when a reader-character relationship has been established between Yagharek and the reader.

This knowledge, in line with Felski's argument, is precisely one of the reasons why literature is important – it enables us to discuss sensitive and complicated issues that are nevertheless part of everyday life, but in a context that (here) is free from the cultural, social and political baggage of realist novels. This is certainly not to say that speculative fiction is politically removed from the real world (especially as far as sexual assault is concerned), but my argument is that this type of fiction can create an effective framework for dealing with difficult issues and effectively provide the type of phenomenological knowledge that both gives insight into the nuances of the everyday, and enhances narrative competence and empathy. In real life, empathy is a psychological mechanism that helps us relate to other people and drives our decision-making process ideally in a prosocial direction. Because readers do not have direct influence on what happens to characters in a text, empathy plays a somewhat different role in literature.³³

The process of interpretation can be deceptively difficult, and complex narratives and characters are a necessary foundation for illuminating and meaningful interpretations. It is possible to empathetically understand a character without necessarily agreeing with their actions or opinions. We can empathize with Yagharek and understand his feeling of loss and mutilation, but at the same time disagree with his choice-theft and agree that his actions merit punishment. Eileen John uses Humbert Humbert from Nabokov's *Lolita* as an example:

At some level, I expect that every reader wants Dolores to escape. However, I also expect that readers have many empathetic experiences aligned with Humbert. A reader, not in any sense "on board" with his project of control and sexual exploitation of Dolores, still seems likely to register the deserted tennis court with a hint of Humbert's alarm and sense of emptiness.³⁴

This is particularly interesting because of the point that reading enables us to experiment with points of view and alignments that are significantly more

33 Nünning touches on the issue of narratives and stimuli: "To understand complex emotions and thought processes, it is necessary to be able to construct narratives which explain why a stimulus resulted in a specific feeling or evoked a specific idea. Processes of comprehending others are thus based on and regulated by the interpretation of narratives." (Nünning (annotation 5), p. 295.)

34 John (annotation 7), p. 308.

difficult to explore in real life. In this sense, Yagharek and Humbert are similar – they commit acts that most readers will find reprehensible, but nevertheless (in two different ways) manage to evoke a sense of empathy. Yagharek is pitiable and turns out to be a stouthearted friend; Humbert is sly and uses linguistic skill to lure readers into accepting – or at least toying with – his side of the story. These examples also highlight that empathy and character identification goes beyond in-their-shoes scenarios where readers imagine themselves as the main character. It is very well possible to empathize with characters even if they are ethically unattractive and have no qualities that a reader might envy or endorse. Empathizing with Humbert to a degree where a reader defends him is falling into a narrative trap. Yagharek cannot be reduced either, and any interpretation of the situation is made more complicated by the vaguely explained garuda-culture. By the end of *Perdido Street Station*, Yagharek not only remains flightless, but embraces life as a non-garuda (or even human) living in New Crobuzon. He is one last time presented with Isaac's (and, in a way, the readers') reaction to the choice-theft revelation as he reads a parting-letter that Isaac wrote before abandoning the city and Yagharek: "The extraordinary tension in the words seems to make them crawl. I can see Isaac striving for so many things as he writes. Bluff no-nonsense. Anger, stern disapproval. True misery. Objectivism. And some weird comradeship, some shame-faced apology."³⁵

By the end of this road, readers will recognize many of these emotions. Isaac's position is difficult because Yagharek was in many ways a true friend, and it allows a glimpse into how complex relationships can become. Only through empathetic readings of these characters can we appreciate the depths of their pain and the significance of their journey and choices. Yagharek himself is riddled with contradictory feelings: he regrets his actions, but wants to fly again; he has accepted that he must be punished for choice-theft, but violently opposed having his wings removed; he appreciates Isaac's attempts at helping him, but is disappointed and unsurprised at Isaac's eventual disappearance.

I never questioned that I deserved the judgement. Even when I fled to find flight again. I was doubly ashamed. Crippled and shorn of respect for my choice-theft; I would add to that the shame of overturning a just punishment. I could not live. I could not be earthbound. I was dead.³⁶

Whether a reader at this point empathizes with Yagharek is up to individual response. Just as empathy is a process, it is also individual, and people react differently to the same stimuli. One person might be tempted to forgive Yagharek while others may find his pain and troubles fair consequences of his actions. As we reflect on these problems, theory of mind is almost inadvertently practiced. One advantage of reflecting upon and analyzing one's own empathetic response to such characters is exactly that fiction allows us to toy with emotional responses that may be hard (or even inappropriate) to feel towards a real-life

35 Miéville (annotation 15), p. 1528.

36 Ibid., p. 1533.

person. This type of empathetic response "exemplifies a relaxation of the self's control of perspective, an openness to "activation" by another's concerns, that it seems we seek out in fiction".³⁷

One might argue about the extent to which feeling empathy with characters is important. In the mentioned examples, I would strongly argue that empathy (in its various manifestations) plays a crucial role, but other works place less focus on the inner workings of characters and instead rely on external events to drive the plot forward. Another Miéville novel, *The City and The City*, is a noir-inspired detective story where the political storyworld is the focus, and the main character, Tyador Borlú, would make a less interesting empathy-focused case study. This relates to a point I made early on, namely that appreciation of literature requires acknowledgment of emotional responses to the narrative, but what triggers these emotions may vary from text to text, and not all stories place equal importance on engaging with the inner lives of characters. Even Miéville's focus is more often on the (new) weird with particular interest in strange monsters, but exactly this kind of speculative fiction provides frameworks that allow experimentation and exposes readers to both characters and situations that are difficult to come across in other genres.

The key to understanding the beneficial aspect of literature is understanding how literature presents specific interactive situations, which enhances a reader's understanding of the nature and scope of such encounters and of human communication generally. Even weird non-human characters can be effective vehicles for this, and many speculative fiction narratives thus offer a safe setting for trying on new knowledge, temporarily aligning with counter-intuitive viewpoints, experimenting with taboo or undesired perspectives, and through all this create an environment for learning about the self and others. Emotions are honed through the same mechanisms as much else – practice and exposure. Art and literature induce us to practice emotions such as empathy and expose us to situations where empathic responses are an important part of the reading experience.

37 John (annotation 7), p. 315.