

The Transformative Power of Literary Perspectives

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Abstract. *This article employs the concept of “transformative experience” to develop a radical version of aesthetic cognitivism, according to which engaging with literary perspectives might lead the reader to experience not only an epistemic but also a personal transformation. It is argued that the reader’s imaginative and empathic abilities when subjected to the aesthetic norms that govern a literary work can mobilize other aspects of their psychology, eliciting in this way a change in their core values and, consequently, in the way in which they engage with the world. After introducing the topic (section 1), the article discusses the scope of literary perspectives in terms of the character’s subjective experiences (section 2). Next, it offers an analysis of the depth of literary perspectives in terms of the degree of involvement of the reader’s imaginative and empathic abilities (section 3). It proceeds to examine how the interplay between the scope and depth in the reader’s engagement with a literary perspective can explain their epistemic and personal transformation (section 4). In the final part, the article analyzes how the personal transformation changes the reader’s value system (section 5). The main findings are summarized in the conclusion (section 6).*

1. Introduction

According to L. A. Paul, an experience is “transformative” when it leads us to see the world in a new manner. Like other authors of a long philosophical tradition, experience is for her the best teacher. She argues that there

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are certain insights that can only be acquired by having the relevant experiences. More precisely, the sense of what it is like to have an experience can only be taught by undergoing the experience. Neither relying on the testimony of others nor resorting to the power of theorizing or imagining is enough to know what it is like to have the experience ourselves. As she puts it, “You need to have the experience itself to know what it is really like.”¹ In Paul’s view, having had an experience puts us in a privileged position compared to those who have not had the experience and do not know how it really feels. In this context, a transformative experience is one that provides us with this sort of knowledge. Experiences can be transformative in two ways. Experiences are “epistemically” transformative if they provide us with new information. In Paul’s words, eating durian is transformative in this sense because the taste of this fruit is very different from anything we already know. An experience is “personally” transformative when it changes our view of the world and our core preferences in such a way that it ultimately changes how we experience ourselves.² The hypothetical case of becoming a vampire or the experience of becoming a parent or being the victim of a cruel attack is transformative in this second sense. Though both types of transformative experiences can occur separately, as Paul argues, the most interesting cases occur when an experience is both epistemically and personally transformative. In such instances, we not only experience something new but also are transformed as persons.

Though the kind of experiences Paul has in mind are not those we have while engaging with literary fictions, my aim in this article is to apply the concept of “transformative experience” to this field. In my view, this concept can help explain the transformative impact that engaging with literature might have on the reader. Initially developed in the context of decision theory, Paul’s concept has been applied to several different domains, such as psychology, narrativity, art, and ethics.³ Yet, to my knowledge, an application of “transformative experiences” to the field of aesthetic cognitivism—which argues that works of literature serve to please and can be cognitively valuable—has yet to be undertaken.⁴ More precisely, my aim is to explore how engaging with the character’s perspectives—in short, “literary perspectives”—can be regarded as a transformative experience.⁵ This is by no means the only way in which literary fictions might be transformative. Literature can also be transformative because it transmits truths or fosters cognitive and affective abilities. However, engaging with literary perspectives is, in my view, an important way in which literary works might motivate the reader’s transformation.

Given that experiences can be transformative in two different respects, the claim that engaging with literary perspectives can be transformative takes the form of two different readings. According to the first, engaging with literary perspectives might lead to an epistemic transformation. In

this sense, the widely defended claim among aesthetic cognitivists that we might obtain nontrivial knowledge of reality by reading literature can be reinterpreted in terms of eliciting an epistemic transformation. Engaging with literary perspectives would enable the reader to undergo what Dorothy Walsh and Gottfried Gabriel call “virtual” or “imaginative” experiences, in this way gaining new knowledge about the world.⁶ Though virtual or imaginative experiences are not substitutes for real experiences, they can, when accurately generated, have an epistemic value that is similar to the value of real-life experiences.

The second possible reading is more radical. Yet, it is this reading that is at stake in this article. In this interpretation, engaging with the character’s perspectives might lead the reader to not only an epistemic transformation but also a personal transformation. Such transformations are what, in my view, R. W. Beardsmore had in mind (though he did not employ the concept of transformative experience) when he indicated a case in which a reader whose life has gone sour comes to see new significance in their existence after reading literature.⁷ According to Beardsmore, what the reader has learned from the novel cannot be explained in terms of propositional or practical knowledge (i.e., in terms of the learning of facts or techniques) but requires consideration of other forms of learning.⁸ In my view, this mode of learning is better captured by the concept of personal transformation. Such personal transformation can be based on an epistemic transformation but is not reducible to it. Indeed, what is changed here are the reader’s core preferences and values. More precisely, I will develop an extreme version of aesthetic cognitivism in which the reader’s experiences are close enough to real-life experiences to lead them to acquire knowledge and to make an impact on the person they are and motivate a deep personal change.

Yet, the concept of “transformative experience” cannot be applied directly to the field of aesthetic cognitivism. Some changes and refinements are called for. It is necessary to argue, against Paul, for the relevance of the imagination in personal transformations. Indeed, though I do not want to challenge the notion that having an experience is an important source of knowledge and that it can put us in a privileged position compared to those who have not had it, my radical version of aesthetic cognitivism requires us to acknowledge the contribution of the imagination to epistemic and personal transformation. As mentioned previously, virtual or imaginative experiences might be regarded as experiences that are able to teach us. Following a line of thought inaugurated by Amy Kind—for whom not only experience but also imagination can be epistemically transformative,⁹ I will argue that our imaginings, when subjected to the aesthetic norms that govern a literary work, can lead to both an epistemic and a personal transformation. Moreover, it is also important to acknowledge that different forms of affectivity are crucial in explaining how a change in our core preferences and values

involves not only an epistemic transformation but also a change of our personal identity. Both imagination and affectivity will play an important role in the elaboration of my main thesis in this article.

The article begins with a discussion of the scope of literary perspectives in terms of the character's subjective experiences (section 2). Next, it offers an analysis of the depth of literary perspectives in terms of the degree of involvement of the reader's imaginative and empathic abilities (section 3). It proceeds to examine how the interplay between the scope and depth in the reader's engagement with a literary perspective can explain the epistemic and personal transformation (section 4). In the final part, the article analyzes how the personal transformation changes the reader's value system (section 5). The main findings are summarized in the conclusion (section 6).

2. The Scope of Literary Perspectives: From Single Experiences to the Character's Heart

Let me begin with an analysis of the concept of literary perspective. As noted by Wolfgang Iser, this concept has been widely employed among philosophers of literature as being synonymous with "what the world looks like from a certain point of view."¹⁰ Yet, this expression is quite vague; although it can be interpreted in different ways, rarely has it been explained in detail. In this context, Iser makes a suggestive distinction between two different meanings of perspective. The first meaning ties perspective to subjective experiences from a point of view,¹¹ whereas the second concerns the mechanisms, actions, or techniques that enable the subject to represent a perspective in the first sense.¹² Drawing on this distinction, I will explore literary perspectives in the sense of subjective experiences in this section and will analyze the mental action required to enter into them in the next section. Yet, as I shall argue, perspective in the first sense encompasses a wide spectrum of phenomena that ranges from the characters' single subjective experiences or combinations thereof to the general mode in which the characters engage with the world. In brief, the notion of "literary perspective" might be used to refer to subjective experiences that strongly differ in *scope*.

When the expression "literary perspective" is used to refer to a character's *single subjective experiences*, it refers to subjective experiences that appear in isolation. These subjective experiences can be as variegated as the subjective states. They encompass perceptions, imaginings, memories, beliefs, suppositions, emotions, bodily feelings, moods, sentiments, desires, and so on. In this case, to adopt the character's perspective means to adopt one of these types of experience as exemplified by the literary character.

The notion of "literary perspective" might refer to a *combination of subjective experiences* as well. In this case, the kinds of aforementioned subjective experiences appear not in isolation but combined in different ways.

A perspective in this sense might refer to combinations of emotions and desires, or perceptions and beliefs, to mention only two possible variations. We can also imagine perspectives that result from a combination of several of these states such as perceptions, bodily feelings, imaginings, and memories. Literary works might present us with interesting combinations of perspectives in this sense. A character might be presented as experiencing contradictory, mixed, or extremely unusual combinations of subjective experiences. To adopt the character's perspective in this case means to adopt this combination of subjective experiences. Note that if the reader is unfamiliar with the combination at stake, engaging with these combinations of perspectives might mobilize the reader's psychology in a way that is more demanding than imagining an experience in isolation. Yet, this may not always be the case: single experiences might also be challenging for the reader if they are sophisticated, complex, or novel.

The fact that perspectives (in isolation or in combination) are interpreted in terms of subjective experiences implies that an important aspect of engaging with perspectives concerns the "what it is like" of experiencing them.¹³ That is, perspectives are given to us not in abstracto but as perspectives of the experiencing subject and their distinct psychology, which therefore have a particular phenomenology.

Whereas single perspectives represent one extreme of the spectrum of "literary perspectives," namely those that refer to a single state, the other end is represented by the character's *form of engagement with the environment* (though it is less widespread than the two other uses discussed previously). In this case, the subjective experience refers not to a specific occurrent episode but to the way in which the character engages with the world and how some aspects of the world are rendered visible while others are left hidden. We can find this notion of perspectives under different headings in current research. In my view, this notion is at work in Elisabeth Camp when she connects perspectives with dispositions.¹⁴ It is also at stake when Eileen John, drawing on Iris Murdoch and Cora Diamond, refers to the "texture of being" as a grab-bag category that includes matters such as "what the person thinks is funny, attractive, and praiseworthy, how she addresses others and herself."¹⁵ John describes it in terms of "configurations of thought," referring to that which makes certain things important to a person and how that person relates to others and things. To engage with a literary perspective in this sense is to grasp how a character engages with the environment over time. This notion of perspective has a much broader scope than the notion of perspective presented earlier and indicates an essential aspect of the character's individuality.

To refer to this notion of perspective, I prefer to use the phenomenological term of the *heart*. In my view, the notion of "heart" is more appropriate than "dispositions" or "configurations of thought" when referring to how a

character engages with the world. On the one hand, not only dispositions but also occurrent forms of engagement are revelatory of how a person engages with the environment. Indeed, a single experience, such as an emotion, a desire, a belief, can be revelatory of a person's individual way of engaging with the world. On the other hand, the way in which we engage with the world cannot be completely captured by the idea of "thought," because it also encompasses perceptions, affects, desires, sentiments, and so on. By contrast, the metaphor of the heart, employed by phenomenologists such as Max Scheler and more recent scholars who draw on him, such as Roberta De Monticelli, refers to the basic affective orientation from which a being engages with the world.¹⁶ The kind of affectivity at stake here is not a single occurrent subjective experience but an enduring form of relating to the environment. In phenomenology, this basic affective form of engagement is responsible for making some evaluative properties of the environment visible while others remain hidden and presenting these properties in an order or hierarchy of relevance. Thus, the heart is what, for instance, distinguishes a person who is very sensitive to moral matters from a person who is sensitive to aesthetic issues. Questions of justice and injustice will be of crucial relevance for the former, whereas the world is organized around the idea of beauty and elegance for the latter. In phenomenology, it is argued that this basic affective orientation is foundational for other forms of relating to the world. In fact, perceptions, judgments, actions, emotions, and thoughts are organized and articulated according to the evaluative properties we are able to experience and their order of relevance. In other words, this form of affectivity gives our perceptions, memories, imaginings, beliefs, suppositions, emotions, desires, and so on a particular shape. Therefore, the person with a heart for moral issues will be more attentive to certain aspects of the world than the person with a sensitivity for aesthetic issues. The morally oriented person will articulate their perceptions, imaginings, memories, beliefs, desires, and so on around moral values, whereas the aesthetically oriented person will do the same but around aesthetic values. As a result, to engage with a character's perspective in this sense means to get a grasp of the basic form of *affective orientation* that shapes how the character will relate to the environment. This involves grasping "what it is like" to be the character, what experiences one has when occupying their place, and how these experiences feel from a particular existential position different from one's own.

3. The Depth of Literary Perspectives: Imaginative and Empathic Abilities

In this section, I turn to the idea of perspective in the sense of a mental mechanism, action, or activity that enables the reader to grasp characters'

subjective experiences. To this end, I will analyze the reader's imaginative and empathic abilities. We are able to grasp a character's perspective only by setting in motion a series of imaginative exercises such as re-presenting the character's perspective, shifting perspective with the character, and imagining-experiencing what the character is going through. Whereas the first imaginative exercise aims at the creation of perspective, the last two involve simulation and enable the reader to imagine this perspective "from the inside." In fact, the three imaginative exercises can be regarded as steps or stages of a process of imagining the literary perspective, that is, a character's subjective experience (which, as we have seen, ranges from single subjective experiences to what I called a character's "heart"). In some particular cases, however, as we shall see, these imaginings enable the reader to empathize with a character so that they then not only imagine what this character is living through but can also co-experience it.

Let me begin with an analysis of the three imaginative abilities set in motion by the reader in order to engage with a character's perspective. The first imaginative exercise consists in *re-presenting the character's perspective*.¹⁷ The reader reconstructs in their mind the character's point of view following the instructions given by the fictional work. This re-presentation involves imaginings of different types such as "imagine that x, y, or z is the case," "imagine the character playing," or "imagine the character's red hair." Important here is that these imaginings are able to re-present in the reader's mind what the character is going through but that they do so from an external perspective. These are imaginings "from the outside," that is, imaginings in which the reader does not adopt the character's point of view. By contrast, the next two kinds of imagining involve imagining "from the inside" and aim at a simulation of the character's experience.¹⁸

The second imaginative exercise consists in *perspective-shifting*. Here, the reader not only imagines the character's experience but also imagines being in the character's place.¹⁹ In the literature on perspective-shifting, Amy Coplan distinguishes between self- and other-oriented perspective-shifting.²⁰ In self-oriented perspective-shifting, I imagine what it would be like for me to experience the world from the character's perspective. In other-oriented perspective-shifting, I imagine how it is for the character to experience the world from their own perspective. It is not always easy to trace the dividing line between both kinds of perspective-shifting because to imagine what it is like for a character to feel pain, for instance, we must resort to our experiences of pain and therefore other-oriented imagining may also have a personal note. Other-oriented perspective-shifting is much more ambitious: we not only have to imagine how it is for the other to see the world from a particular perspective—a task that requires gathering information about the other's biography, psychology, expectations, etc.—we also must allow the character's perspective to emerge. Fictional works function as guides that

enable us to imagine how it is not only for us but also for the character to undergo specific experiences.

A third imaginative exercise consists in the experiential recreation of the character's subjective experience. This involves *imagining-experiencing* what the character is going through. For instance, if we adopt the character's perceptual experiences, imagining-experiencing consists in generating a perceptual-like state or a quasi perception; if we adopt the character's emotional experience, then imagining-experiencing consists in recreating an emotion-like state or a quasi emotion; if we adopt the character's beliefs, imagining-experiencing consists in generating a belief-like state, and so on. We can also generate imaginings of combined subjective experiences. Importantly, we can also imagine how it feels to be the character as such.²¹ Note that here we do not have to really experience what the character is going through, but we have to imagine-experience it. Also, in this respect, the literary fiction will help us, acting as a guide to direct our imaginings so that the recreation of the character's subjective experience is accurate.

At this point, we could be tempted to equate the three processes I am describing here to "empathy" or, more precisely, to "fictional empathy." In fact, some contemporary authors take "perspective-shifting" to be synonymous with "empathy."²² I want to avoid this equation for three key reasons. First, as argued by phenomenologists, there are forms of empathy that can take place without perspective-shifting. This happens when we "see" the sadness in the other's face. So, although imagining is required in the case of literary characters, this is not always the case.²³ In many of our everyday encounters, we can perceive the other's mental states directly. Second, empathy is principally concerned with the other's affective states, whereas in perspective-shifting we might target a wider array of the other's subjective experiences. Finally, empathy requires not only that we imagine what the other is going through but also that we come to resonate with the other by experiencing something similar.

Though the three imaginative steps cannot be regarded as empathy, they can nonetheless lead the reader to *empathize* with the character. I take "empathy" here to mean a form of apprehension of what the other is going through, which requires a kind of "interpersonal similarity" so that the reader comes to experience something similar. Thus, empathy enables the reader to co-experience what the character is experiencing. In empathy, the reader will imaginatively recreate the sadness of the character and will come to apprehend the character's sadness and to experience something that resonates with this sadness. If the character is sad, I do not necessarily have to be sad myself when I empathize, but I have to experience an affective state that presents the world to me in a way that is compatible with the character's sadness, such as preoccupation or worry. Because we are able to empathize with the affective states of the other, we can imagine the possibility that a

reader empathizes with the character's basic and enduring form of affectivity, which earlier I called the "heart." To empathize with the character's heart might sound odd, but by this I mean how the reader comes to grasp the character's basic affective orientation around which more concrete forms of engagement with the environment are articulated. This form of empathy can be the result of empathizing with a single but revelatory affective state of the character, or it might result when the reader has apprehended several states of the character so that they get a picture of how the character engages with the world. Thus, empathizing with the character's affective state and with the heart will enable the reader to experience the world as the character does.²⁴

Note that I describe here these imaginative and empathic exercises in terms of steps or stages, in this way indicating their procedural nature. Imagining a character's perspective and empathizing with it has a temporal structure: the three imaginative exercises are stages in a process of grasping the character's perspectives. At the same time, each of these imaginative and empathic exercises has the quality of a process. We rarely read a work in one sitting: we often interrupt the reading, and imagining perspectives requires that we repeatedly look back at the narratives, rearranging and interpreting elements. Imagining a character's perspective and empathizing with it is not something that takes place immediately. Impressions are gradually developed in articulated perspectives, and patterns that did not make sense initially can be better interpreted over time. We may try out the newly acquired perspectives, trying to see the world starting from them and reconciling them with our own biography or with the biographies of others we know.

The idea of steps or stages indicates a progression from superficial forms of involvement to deeper ones, that is, to forms that require a greater mobilization of the reader's psychology in order to be achieved. To imagine and empathize with the character's perspective is therefore a question of *depth*. Indeed, to empathize with the character is a more demanding activity than merely to re-present to ourselves the character's point of view. The former requires not only re-presenting the other's perspective but also shifting perspectives to recreate experientially what the character is going through and to come to experience something similar.

The imaginative and empathic exercises that take place, guided by the fictional work, are subjected to aesthetic norms. This point is important because although these forms of imagining and empathy might also be involved in our engagement with the perspectives of real others, in fiction they are subject to aesthetic rules. In fact, literary fictions strive to elicit specific responses by using a wide array of devices. For instance, fiction clearly articulates the character's experiences so that empathy is easy in comparison to the fragmentary structures often exhibited by the mental lives of real

human beings. Moreover, literary perspectives might become incomprehensible if the reader does not interpret the work in accordance with aesthetic rules. A character's perspective can be quite different from the perspective of a real human being. It might happen that characters have experiences that are outside our understanding, such as being able to foresee the future, having paranormal perceptions, time traveling, and becoming invisible. These differences require us to interpret the work aesthetically. In this regard, meanings are ascribed to a work from the words and phrases of the text and from its structural and contextual features.²⁵ In short, I am suggesting that if the reader does not follow the aesthetic norms of the fiction, then such responses cannot arise and the reader's engagement with the work is incomplete or may not even take place.

This emphasis on the aesthetic norms that govern our imaginative and empathic engagement with the character's perspectives should not be understood as a concession to the non-cognitivists, that is, those who argue that literature does not have a cognitive value. Rather, the opposite is true. Instead of arguing that the subjection to aesthetic norms has the aim of pleasing the reader, providing them with knowledge as a mere side effect,²⁶ the thought I will develop in the next section is that imaginative and empathic abilities that are subject to aesthetic rules can lead the reader not only to an epistemic shift but also to a more profound personal change.

4. Literary Perspectives and the Reader's Epistemic and Personal Transformations

So far, I have discussed the scope and depth of literary perspectives. As I have shown, literary perspectives differ regarding the scope of their contents and the depth of the reader's engagement with them, that is, their degree of involvement in imagining and empathizing with them. In this section, I explore how the interplay between both elements might explain how the reader's engagement with literary perspectives leads them to an epistemic and personal transformation. In particular, I am interested in the possibility of the latter kind of transformation, according to which the reader experiences a change of core preferences and values. Yet, because the personal transformation is based on an epistemic transformation, these transformations go hand in hand and therefore require a joint exploration.

I will work here with the idea that the wider the scope of a literary perspective, the greater the mobilization of the reader's psychology: when the perspective has a wider scope, the reader must resort to their knowledge, experience, memory, imagining, and so on in order to engage with this perspective. A perspective with a narrow scope, such as a single subjective experience, will require the mobilization of fewer elements. Equally, the deeper the reader's imaginative and empathic involvement, the greater the

mobilization of their psychology. As argued in section 3, the reader is able to engage with the character's perspective in a series of stages or steps that involve imagining and empathizing. To re-present a perspective is less ambitious than to imagine it from the inside, as occurs in perspective-shifting. Equally, imagining-experiencing is more demanding than perspective-shifting because it involves the recreation of how the experience feels. Empathizing with the character requires a more significant degree of involvement than the three forms of imagining the character's perspective: only in empathy does the reader co-experience what the character is going through.

The difference in degree of psychological mobilization when the reader engages with a literary perspective is important because, as I shall suggest, it determines the impact of the engagement on the reader. The correlation is explained as follows: an activity that leads us to resort to our own biography, knowledge, and memories over a period of time in order to engage with a literary perspective might lead us to *grow into this perspective*. I will argue for this claim with two thought experiments, one concerning the scope and the other concerning the depth of literary perspectives.

Let me begin by considering the scope of the reader's psychological mobilization. As we have seen, perspectives in the sense of subjective experiences might encompass a wide range of phenomena, from a single state and combinations of states to the character's heart, the mode through which the character engages with the world. The character's heart is wider in scope than a single state or a combination of states because "heart" refers to a basic form of affectivity that structures our engagement with the environment. Imagine a scenario in which reader X is able to engage with a single perspective, reader Y can engage with combinations of perspectives, and reader Z is able to engage with the character's heart. Suppose now that they read Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* in which the protagonist Ivan Ilyich experiences his life coming to an end and realizes that he has not yet started to live. Reader X is able to engage only with Ivan's despair as a single state. Perhaps she has been in situations in which she also felt despair, even if these situations have nothing to do with Ivan's case; perhaps she knows such experiences by means of the testimony of others; perhaps she is unfamiliar with the state of despair but can imagine it as an intensified form of an emotional pain with which she is already familiar. This reader comes into contact with a new perspective if she has never imagined the situations and experiences described in the novel. Now, through imagining them, she can become aware that such perspectives are possible and can gain some knowledge of truths about them. Reader Y is able to imagine combinations of experiences such as Ivan's feelings of despair and his regretful thoughts. This reader has a more ambitious project. It is possible that this reader has some difficulties in engaging with this specific combination because it is not something she usually encounters in her everyday life. Reader Z engages with Ivan's heart,

the basic form of affectivity that shapes how Ivan engages with the world. This is an even more challenging project because it requires the reader to grasp Ivan's basic affective orientation, an orientation that makes certain evaluative aspects of the world relevant to him (e.g., giving meaning to his life) while occluding others (e.g., the value of his family).

Yet, the mobilization of the reader's psychology is not only a question of scope but also of depth. Here is my second thought experiment. Consider four readers: A, B, C, and D. Reader A is able to re-present the character's perspective, but she is incapable of perspective-shifting, imagining-experiencing, and empathizing. This reader is able to fill the gaps while imagining a literary perspective not explicitly described in the fictional work. She is able to imagine the color of Ivan's bed, though this is not mentioned in the text. To reconstruct Ivan's perspective, perhaps she can resort to what she knows about dying, about regret, about illness. Reader B is not only able to recreate the character's perspective but also to shift perspectives with him. The reader can imagine what it is like for Ivan to be in despair; through this, she mobilizes her capacities to put her own self aside momentarily to get the other-oriented perspective. She is able to adopt Ivan's perspective, in this way embedding herself in a situation that probably differs from what is familiar to her. From this embedded perspective, she can grasp how it must be for a person like Ivan to become ill and to realize that he is dying, that his family does not love him, and that he has not yet started to live. Yet, this reader is unable to imagine the "flesh and blood" of Ivan's experiences, and she is unable to empathize with him. Reader C is able to recreate the character's perspective; she can shift perspectives with the character and imagine the character experiencing the situation. She imagines what the world looks like when in despair, depression, self-reproach, emotional pain, and so on, and she imagines the character undergoing these experiences with all their corresponding phenomenal qualities. This requires a great involvement of the reader's imaginative abilities; to recreate the character's experiences, she has to resort to her own experience, her own knowledge, and so on. At the same time, she has to leave certain aspects of her own psychology aside in order to imagine how Ivan feels in this situation as opposed to how she would feel if she were in Ivan's place. This degree of involvement might have an impact on the reader, leading her to know how it is for the character to be in this situation and maybe to be able to understand psychologically what Ivan is going through. This mobilizes the reader's psychology to a deeper level than the two other cases. Imagining-experiencing Ivan's affective states might disclose to the reader some issues that are hidden to the previous readers. The pain and despair imaginatively experienced reveal to this reader a dimension that is hidden from the other two readers, a dimension that shows that Ivan's environment is full of negative evaluative properties: the dangerous, the menacing, the dark. Though this kind of imagining is not

the same as knowing through experience what it feels like to undergo such experiences, it is something close to it. In this respect, reader C is in a better epistemic position than readers B and A.

Reader D is the only one who is able to empathize with the character. This involves a deeper involvement of the self because the reader has to resonate with the character by experiencing something similar. This requires keeping the self-other distinction alive while resorting to what one knows, has experienced, and remembers in order to construct the character's perspective, adopt it, and imagine how the other experiences it. As she empathizes with Ivan, this reader undergoes similar experiences of despair. This enables the reader to co-experience the world as the character does as opposed to merely imagining it. This might have a more profoundly transformative impact on her.

It is possible to generate combined variations of all these readers. For instance, reader XA is able to re-present a single perspective, whereas reader ZA re-presents in her mind the character's heart. Reader AC experientially imagines how it feels to undergo the particular experience of despair. Reader ZC imagines what it is like to be the character. Reader ZD has the most challenging project because she empathizes with the character's heart (in the aforementioned sense). Because my thinking here is that differences in the scope and depth of the reader's psychological mobilization might be relevant in understanding how engaging with a character has an epistemic and personal impact on her, we can expect that reader XA will be less prone to experience a transformation than reader ZD.

In all these cases, provided they achieve the cognitive gains that I mentioned for each case, the readers might experience an epistemic transformation. In my view, the epistemic impact experienced by reader ZD will be greater than the one experienced by XA. ZD is able to co-experience the character's basic form of affective engagement with the world, whereas reader XA only re-presents a single subjective experience in her mind. The co-experiencing will have a greater epistemic impact not only because it enables the reader to imagine the affective orientation in which the character engages with the world but also because it allows her to feel how it is to occupy a specific existential position that differs from her own. This reader will be able to co-experience the way in which Ivan responds to his imminent death.

The interesting issue here is that the reader might also be led to a personal transformation. For this to occur, the reader must experience a change in their core preferences and values. Though I do not exclude the possibility that a reader who merely re-presents to themselves the character's perspective might experience a change in their value system, it seems more plausible that they come to this change when they co-experience the other's heart. Thus, we can expect that what produces a deep change in the reader at the personal level is what engages their imagination and empathic abilities

in greater scope and depth. Thus, it is more probable that a person who engages with the character's heart and does so not only by re-presenting it in their mind but by empathizing with the character comes to experience a personal transformation because they experience the world as the character does. A reader who after reading *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* experiences a personal transformation will start to value each minute of their life.

In this respect, imagining and empathizing with the character's perspective in different scopes and depth of degrees of involvement is not separate from learning from that perspective. This is what leads the reader to *grow into the perspective* and make it their own. This result is important because it shows that engaging with literary perspectives can be regarded as what Agnes Callard has called a "transformative activity" rather than a "transformative revelation." According to Callard, whereas the latter concerns cases such as becoming a vampire or a parent or being the victim of a crime, the paradigmatic case for the former is learning a language. In her example, "learning a foreign language can be a transformative experience, affording a person access to a different way of thinking and conducting one's life."²⁷ Learning a foreign language changes the person in their cognitive states and in their preferences, but the change does not suppose a sudden break in their biography. Here we grow into a new role. In a transformative revelation, our doings and our comings-to-knowledge are not identical. By contrast, in a transformative activity, the doing and the learning are not distinct from one another. In fact, the doing is the learning.²⁸ Engaging with literary perspectives fulfills precisely this learning criterion. Yet, what we learn here is not just a cognitive achievement but is a new way of seeing the world.

5. Changing Who You Are: The Transformation of the Reader's Heart

In the previous section, I analyzed how the mobilization of our psychology might impact us epistemically and personally; here I will focus more precisely on how this impact leads to a change in the reader's core preferences and values, modifying their understanding of themselves.²⁹ In my view, the personal transformation experienced by the reader is a transformation of their own value system, which I referred to earlier as the "heart."

Prima facie, engaging with a literary perspective might impact the reader and lead them to re-evaluate their own value system and to change it in different ways: it might reinforce, enlarge, or weaken it, or lead to a radical change.

A *reinforcement* of our system of values takes place if, when engaging with the character, we reaffirm our own value system. This might happen in very different ways. On the one hand, the reader's value system can be reinforced by engaging with a fictional character whose value system is similar

to their own. On the other hand, a reinforcement can also take place when the other with whom the reader engages has a very different value system, one that the reader comes to reject absolutely while imaginatively engaging with the other.

The most interesting cases are those leading not to a reinforcement but to a change.³⁰ This change can take different forms. An *enlargement* of the reader's value system takes place when the reader adopts new values, new value nuances, new constellations, new hierarchies, or new value bearers. This occurs without the reader abandoning their own value system. Rather, the empathizer expands their value system by incorporating what they learn through engaging with the character's perspectives. The reader's value system can be *weakened* when it is confronted with the character's values and the reader realizes that their own value system is flawed. A weakening might occur when the character's values are very different from the reader's own and they realize that their value system has to be modified. However, it can also be the case that the weakening takes place when the reader engages with a character who reacts similarly to the reader and has a similar value system: the reader comes to experience this value system objectively, and this gives them the opportunity to see it with a certain distance and perhaps experience it as being flawed.

More interesting for the purposes of this article is when a *radical change* of the reader's value system occurs. This might take place when the character's values lead the reader to abandon their own value system in favor of a different one. The new value system might be the one that the reader has encountered in the character. In this case, the character would function as a guide or role model for the reader. However, it might also be a completely new value system forged by the reader after a process of reflection and refinement has taken place.

This change in the reader's value system modifies the reader's understanding of themselves because it transforms their "heart." Indeed, the value system that is characteristic of each of us and that is, for classical and contemporary phenomenologists, affective in nature defines our personal identity. As stated by Scheler and contemporary phenomenologists such as De Monticelli, the heart is crucial in understanding a person's evaluative outlook of reality, and this is what configures the person she is. Our personal identity can be explained in terms of this basic and enduring affective orientation, which determines the way in which the world is presented to us with its evaluative nuances and thus organizes the rest of our psychology. Because the heart makes the evaluative nuances of the world accessible to us, it is foundational for other states; it refers to a form of affectivity, and, moreover, a change in this basic affective orientation involves a change in our personality. As Scheler put it, "Whoever has the *ordo amoris* of a man has the man himself."³¹ Given that we are speaking here of a central aspect

of our personal identity, a change in a person's heart is a change in the person. This is important because although our personality is not determined exclusively by our affective core and involves cognitive and conative elements, the affective core is most significantly constitutive of our personal identity. Any change in this core effected by engaging with the character's perspectives will lead us to a personal transformation.

Drawing on the conclusions of the previous section, my claim here is that the reader who engages with the character's heart not merely by imagining but also by empathizing will probably be the reader who experiences a greater personal impact when engaging with literary perspectives. It is by engaging with the character's heart that this reader might come to transform their own.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have employed the concept of "transformative experience" to develop a radical version of aesthetic cognitivism, according to which engaging with literary perspectives might lead the reader to a transformation of their own personality. I have argued that it is by virtue of imagining and empathizing (while still being subject to aesthetic norms) that the reader comes to engage with a wide range of a character's perspectives. I have suggested that the impact of engaging with a character's perspective will correlate with the scope and depth of the mobilization of the reader's psychology, that is, their experiences, memories, knowledge, and so on. The kind of transformation at stake here is not merely epistemic but is personal in nature: it leads the reader to change their value system or, as I put it, figuratively, to transform their "heart."

Notes

I am grateful to Simon Mussell for proofreading this paper.

1. L. A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.
2. Paul, *Transformative Experience*, 16–17.
3. For these different applications, see Enoch Lambert and John Schwenkler, *Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
4. To be precise, aesthetic cognitivism argues that art can provide nontrivial knowledge and that this knowledge is constitutive of its aesthetic value. As such, it entails a cognitive (art has a cognitive value) and an aesthetic thesis (the cognitive value is constitutive of its aesthetic value). Here I will focus on the cognitive thesis and apply it to the case of literary fictions. See, for a description aesthetic cognitivism, Berys Gaut, "Art and Cognition," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 115–26; Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 136.

5. Let me note that although my focus here is on the character's perspective, the notion of "literary perspective" broadly understood includes the author's perspectives, the narrator's perspective, and the perspective of the literary work as a whole.
6. For the notion of virtual experience, see Dorothy Walsh, *Literature and Knowledge* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 90, 105. The notion of imaginative experience has been developed in Gottfried Gabriel, "Fiktion, Wahrheit und Erkenntnis in der Literatur," in *Wahrheit, Wissen und Erkenntnis in der Literatur. Philosophische Beiträge*, eds. Christoph Demmerling and Ingrid Vendrell Ferran (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 163–80.
7. R. W. Beardsmore, "Learning from a Novel," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures* 6 (1973): 23–46.
8. Beardsmore develops his account as a critique of Ryle and those who, drawing on him, held that all forms of knowledge and learning can be explained in terms of either "knowing that" or "knowing how."
9. For the idea that imagination can teach us, see Amy Kind, "What Imagination Teaches," in *Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change*, eds. Enoch Lambert and John Schwenkler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 133–46. Here some ideas can be applied to fiction-guided imaginings.
10. Wolfgang Huemer, "Fictional Narrative and the Other's Perspective," *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 65 (2022): 163.
11. As noted by Huemer, the notion of perspective in this sense might be employed with a focus on the *experiential* aspect or the how it feels like or on the *subjective* aspect of the connected subjective experiences, which provide us "views from the self" (Huemer, "Fictional Narrative," see also: Alex Burri, "Art and the View from Nowhere," in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, eds. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer and Luca Poggi [New York: Routledge, 2007], 308–317). In my view, these two aspects are only separable analytically. As Huemer himself notes, a subject is constituted by these experiences, and the experiences converge in a unique focal point of a subject.
12. Huemer, "Fictional Narrative," 174. He refers to the first meaning in terms of a "cognitive content" and to the second in terms of "cognitive action." Though I will work here with this distinction, I will avoid speaking of "cognitive" contents and actions because subjective experiences encompass not only cognitive states such as perceptions or beliefs but also affective, bodily, and conative states of a different nature such as emotions, moods, vital feelings, desires, wishes, and so on.
13. As rightly noted by Huemer. See Huemer, "Fictional Narrative," 164. However, here I employ the notion of "what it is like" in a broad sense and as not being restricted to the phenomenology of the experience but as involving other elements. On the difference between the broad and vague concept of "what it is like" and the specific concept of "what it is like" in terms of a specific phenomenology, see Antonia Peacocke, "How Literature Expands Your Imagination," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103, no. 2 (2020): 298–319.
14. Elisabeth Camp, "Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction," *Philosophical Perspectives* 31, no. 1 (2017): 74.
15. Eileen John, "Reading Fiction and Conceptual Knowledge: Philosophical Thought in Literary Context," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 4 (1998): 340.
16. Max Scheler, "Ordo amoris," in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. D. R. Lachterman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, 1973). As an example of a contemporary development, see Roberta De Monticelli, "Values, Norms, Justification and the Appropriateness of Emotions," in *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotion*, eds.

- Thomas Szanto and Hilge Landweer (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020), 275–87.
17. I employ here the expression “re-presenting,” which is extended among phenomenologists, instead of the notion of “representation.” As argued by Cavallaro in his analysis of Husserl, “re-presentative acts” such as imagining or remembering in which the object is represented “in image” should be distinguished from “presentative acts” such as perception in which an object is presented “in person.” “Re-presenting” and “re-presentation” translate the German term *Vergegenwärtigung*, which means to presentify to our mind something that is absent to the senses (to distinguish this use from the term “representation,” a hyphen following the “re” prefix is employed). See Marco Cavallaro, “The Phenomenon of Ego-Splitting in Husserl’s Phenomenology of Pure Phantasy,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 48, no. 2 (2017): 162–77.
 18. Imagining from the inside is the hallmark of experiential imagining. See Amy Kind, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2016).
 19. For this view that imagining from the inside involves perspective-shifting, see Bence Nanay, “The Role of Imagination in Decision-Making,” *Mind and Language* 31, no. 1 (2016): 135. See also Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
 20. Amy Coplan, “Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects,” in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, eds. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–18.
 21. This idea that imagining-experiencing generates experience-like states can be found in Margherita Arcangeli, “The Two Faces of Mental Imagery,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 101, no. 2 (2020): 304–22. Note that I adopt a quite liberal view here according to which we are able to generate imaginative counterparts of all our mental states and of the character’s ways of engaging with the world.
 22. For a discussion, see Susan L. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); John Gibson, “Empathy,” in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, eds. Noël Carroll and John Gibson (London: Routledge, 2016), 234–46; and Karsten Stueber, “Empathy and the Imagination,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination*, ed. Amy Kind (London: Routledge, 2016), 368–79.
 23. For a defense of the direct perception account of empathy, see Dan Zahavi, “Empathy and Direct Social Perception,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 2, no. 3 (2011): 541–58.
 24. For a development of this point, see Ingrid Vendrell Ferran, “Empathy in Appreciation: An Axiological Account,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 79, no. 2 (2021): 233–38.
 25. For a classical defense of the aesthetic model of interpretation, see Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); and Stein Haugom Olsen, *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
 26. For this view, see Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*; and Peter Lamarque, “Learning from Literature,” in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, eds. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer, and Luca Poggi (New York: Routledge, 2007), 13–23.
 27. Agnes Callard, “Transformative Activities,” in *Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change*, eds. Enoch Lambert and John Schwenkler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 149.
 28. Callard examines the temporal, agential, and learning criterion. After rejecting the first two, she states the difference in terms of the learning criterion. Callard, “Transformative Activities,” 154.

29. This thought is in line with the thesis defended among aesthetic cognitivists that fiction might impact on the reader's values. See, for instance, David Novitz, *Knowledge, Fiction, and Imagination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 139.
30. A change of value system is not always a change for good: literary fictions can make us worse persons.
31. Scheler, "Ordo amoris," 100.