The Oxymoron of Empathic Criticism

Readerly Empathy, Critical Explication, and the Translator's Creative Understanding

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1   *Empathy* is a relatively new term in English. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it was first attested in 1904. This is worth pondering.

2   Shakespeare never used the word. Nor did Chaucer or Milton, Bacon or Bentham, the Bronte sisters, John Stuart Mill or Harriet Beecher Stowe. The philologist in me immediately wants to ask: what did they use in its place? Perhaps they used the French word. No, *empathie*, according to *Le Petit Robert*, first appeared in French in 1903. We find the same conspicuous absence in modern French literary, not to mention, moral history as we find in written English. There is no *empathie* in any French writer from Montaigne to Molière, La Fontaine to Hugo.

3   Along philological lines, perhaps the question of what earlier writers used "in place of" empathy is incorrectly formed. Words come into existence in specific historical circumstances: under definite cultural, political, and sometimes disciplinary conditions. As David Depew makes clear, this is the case with *empathy*.[1] Initially it was a technical term that grew out of the discipline of aesthetic psychology at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

4   This means that asking what Shakespeare or Milton might have used in place of *empathy* is a little like asking what they might have used in place of *disposable razor* or better yet *post-it note*. The term did not exist in their day because in the narrow, technical sense of its origin in the early twentieth century, the concept had not yet come into being.

5   There is another, more radical claim that this absence makes available: that the assertive projection of one's own feelings into another's imagined perspective, which is the activity of empathy (from the German *Einfühlung*), came into being more or less contemporarily with the term itself. *Sympathy* (*Mitleid*) had implied a generally accessible set of human sensibilities that two or more people might tap simultaneously – through music, for instance.

In the realm of moral philosophy, *sympathy* came to be seen as a notion belonging to the Romantic imagination. By the latter nineteenth century, this view had begun to seem naïve, quaint. The more dramatic, even aggressive practice of empathizing with another can thus be understood as an attempt to break through the more thoroughly individuated selves of late modernity. These selves are increasingly seen as lacking any universally available, "sympathetically vibrating" realm in common. David Depew suggests that *empathy* is a "repair concept." My assertion differs only a little. The conditions of modernity, including the development of what Alasdair MacIntyre has called the "autonomous moral agent," facilitated the rise of the more aggressive "entering into" of another's psyche. This compensates in part for the loss of an outside realm where psyches of various kinds could come together in the earlier world of sympathy.[2]

6   There is, however, a more popular usage of empathy as a term. It can make the assertion that "Shakespeare did not know empathy" seem absurd. The term did not remain fixed within the narrow confines of its origin. This happens with technical terms all the time. They move outward from a definite locale of technical usage and become diffuse. They "interface" with a larger culture and resonate with more general concerns that have a much longer histories than the technical term itself. In this connection, asking what Shakespeare used in place of *empathy* might be perfectly reasonable. The meaning at issue would not be technical but colloquial. To popularize the use of *empathy* can be to bring it closer in meaning to other, more familiar terms with longer histories of usage in English: perhaps *sympathy*, possibly *compassion*, maybe *pity* or *consolation* or some combination of creative imaginings of other people's feelings that is nothing if not Shakespearean.[3]

7   I routinely assume that empathy, in this more democratic sense of co-feeling or compassion, is central to experiences in reading fiction. I am not alone in this, although my particular assumption undoubtedly has to do with the kind of fiction I most frequently study: the nineteenth-century realism in literature that includes the long novels of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Turgenev as well as their West European contemporaries from Balzac and Dickens to Flaubert, Eliot, and Henry James.

8   The empathic impulse in reading such works seems almost a given, though the key term in Anglo-American critical discourse has historically been *identification* rather than *empathy*. We readers have long talked about identifying with fictional figures painted in great detail. We say we identify with their sorrows and joys, their ethical dilemmas, their dramatized lives. We even measure the effectiveness, the quality, of fictional works by how well they get us to identify with their characters, to care about them, to feel

with them, to feel for them.

9   This manner of reading and judging works has persisted. In at least one crucial way, it depends on a realist or neo-realist assumption about depiction. Writing that anticipates empathic responses in the readers is supposed to fool people, or allow them to fool themselves temporarily, into seeing its combinations of graphemes as real beings. In this sense, it is something like the trick of showing two dimensions of space as three dimensions in pictorial representation. (Thus the "flat" representation of medieval icons can be thought of as more honest because it doesn't try to delude people about its own two-dimensionality.)

10   Part of this illusionary quality of realist and neo-realist depiction is the convention of having no conventions, merely telling the truth, perhaps despite the beautifying (and falsifying) conventions of storytelling. "I may not be a very good writer, but luckily that shouldn't matter, since I'm merely laying out the truth in all its ugly detail." Or "I wish Mr. Newman had not said such things, but I would be lying to you if I pretended that he hadn't." Identifying or empathizing with the characters in realist or other fiction depends to a great extent on the willingness of readers to accept the claim of a-conventionality that such a narrative convention implies.

11   This point is especially evident when we consider that many experimental modernist or post-modernist texts may or may not elicit identification with characters and may or may not be intended to do so. Among the most vehement, and entertaining, of modernist reactions against identification as the end all of literature was that of Vladimir Nabokov. He relegated those of us who seek identification to the status of "minor readers," presumably by analogy with minor characters.[4]

12   But this only reinforces my claim, for the modernist reaction has been strongest where the realist tradition took firmest root. It is no surprise, therefore, to find Nabokov hacking away at it. Indeed the identificatory manner of reading is still strongly with us. The fact is that if we pick up a fiction-writing book from the shelf of a local book store the first and most constant message on characters will be that the writer must get readers to believe in and care about them as if they were real.

13   Mikhail Bakhtin explored this phenomenon in many of his works, early and late. He dismissed "mere empathy," by which he meant something like "emotional identification," as unhelpful and essentially sterile. "What would I have to gain if another were to fuse with me?" he asked. Another person "would see and know only what I already see and know, he would only repeat in himself the inescapable closed circle of my own life; let him rather remain outside me."[5]

14 For new understanding to be possible, Bakhtin proposed to replace talk of emotional identification with something his early writings call *vzhivanie*. This is from the root *zhit'* (to live) and the prefix *v* (in, or more likely in this case, into). The neologism has been translated by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson as "live entering" or "living into." The idea is to enter actively into another individuality, another perspective on the world – without losing sight even momentarily of one's own unique perspective, one's own "surplus" of life experience, one's own sense of self.[6] This is a relatively early formulation of what he would eventually come to discuss under the rubric of "dialogue," his great discovery and the central concept in much of his work.[7]

15 Several things are noteworthy about *vzhivanie*. First, it is not a translation of *empathy* but an alternative to it. In a later essay of 1952-53, Bakhtin used a very different term for this: "creative understanding."[8] But the emphasis is still on maintaining one's own perspective within another's life circumstances. To put it the other way around, "creative understanding" means entertaining a view of oneself that comes from outside. Bakhtin's thorough familiarity with the literature of empathic aesthetics suggests that he was attempting to go beyond "feeling into" by "living into."[9]

16 Second, *vzhivanie* moves from aesthetics to ethics. This kind of active engagement with another's experience dovetails strikingly with Bakhtin's discussion of Dostoevsky's fiction. For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's novels are ethical testing grounds, with surrogate life experiences that can serve as material for *vzhivanie*, which Bakhtin discussed under the heading of polyphony. He also argued that Dostoevsky undermined crudely instrumental approaches to literature, which Bakhtin addressed under the heading of Menippean Satire. Whether Bakhtin's *vzhivanie* was inspired by Dostoevsky or devised to account for his artistic practice is difficult to say. Still the two writers share a way of engaging ethical questions through aesthetic categories that keeps them among the most compelling thinkers on the relation of art and life.[10]

17 Third, *vzhivanie* in Bakhtin's terms is uncanny in describing how American undergraduates read realist and neo-realist works. Yet *uncanny* might not be the word here, for Bakhtin tended to treat the descriptive technique of novels in the mid- to late-nineteenth century as a culmination of sorts in literary history. He held this particularly for character depiction, especially in the case of Dostoevsky. Thus it is not surprising that ideas Bakhtin developed elsewhere have great relevance for experiences of reading realists. His interpretive keys are made to fit nineteenth-century locks.

18 Reading experiences, however, are not the same as their critical explications. Readers often become absorbed by fictional works, "aesthetically enraptured" by them as Murray Krieger put it.[11] Critics step

away, distance themselves to explicate emotional responses. They also reify, appropriate, synthesize, and evaluate. All these moves emphasize the outsider judgment of critics over the insider identification of readers.

19 At this point, the reasons behind the title of this tour – and the oxymoronic nature of empathic criticism – should become evident. Bakhtin seemed to meld the two activities: the absorption or enrapturing of the reader with the reflection or explication of the critic. His notion of *vzhivanie* attempts to unify and integrate. It is a vision of active wholeness – of psychological, social, and moral health. We might speculate political health as well, especially for a marginal intellectual, like Bakhtin, living in Soviet society of the 1920s and '30s, which suffered an increasingly schizophrenic celebration of High Stalinist culture with awareness of the gulag growing beneath. Soviet politics or no, Bakhtin clearly intended *vzhivanie* then "creative understanding" as socially curative concepts. They were meant to help us think through problems of ethical engagement where literary texts mark contemporary problems and measure their potential solutions.

20 There is another kind of engagement with literature that might serve such a curative purpose. It nullifies in a different manner the oxymoron of *empathic criticism*. Bakthin seemed to dismiss it, but I think he did it a disservice.[12] I am thinking of literary translation. Translation plies a middle ground between readerly identification, which is essentially mute, and critical distance with its plethora of words. This is translation as individual and cultural *practice*, in the usage first proposed by Alasdair MacIntyre. A practice aims at the goods internal to its activities while extending human powers to "achieve excellence." "To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and *a fortiori* the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn."[13] This view presupposes the subjection of one's understanding of a work to standards of the practice rather than privileging, as the dominant strain in Anglo-American critical explication has tended to do, one's own interpretive inventions.

21 About translation as individual practice, I merely observe that the works I feel I know best yet elicit from me the fewest comments are those I have translated. When asked to say something about them, I identify with Lev Tolstoy, who once wrote to the philosopher Nikolai Strakhov, "If I wanted to express in words everything I planned to express through my novel, I would have to write anew from the beginning the very same novel I wrote."[14] In this sense, the activity of translation is the pinnacle of creative understanding.

22 About translation as cultural practice, I may simply cite the paucity of literary translations published in the United States. The remarkably small number of translated literary works (compared to other countries or compared to U.S. publications overall) indicates a lack of American emphasis on creative understanding or *vzhivanie*. Yet clearly we, too, could benefit from "live entering" in Bakhtin's sense – that is, from *empathy* in a larger, more constructive use – especially where differences between our perspectives and those of people living outside our borders are greatest.

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Notes

[1]   See David Depew, "Empathy, Psychology, and Aesthetics: Reflections on a Repair Concept," *Poroi*, 4, 1, March, 2004, http://inpress. lib. uiowa. edu/ poroi/ papers/ depew050301.html.

[2]   Alasdair MacIntyre's claim may be found in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 68.

[3]   This kind of generalized usage would, it seems to me, also include the physiological claims of Frans de Waal in his work on the behavior of chimpanzees. For all the exactitude of observation that such work entails, it makes no distinction equivalent to the kind here. One chimp consoles another for its loss of face. But whether the action may be articulated as an instance of empathy, sympathy, compassion, consolation, pity, in-group solidarity, some combination of these, or even other feelings is not at issue. The fact of imagining another's viewpoint and acting on it is the main point. De Waal provides an abbreviated look at intra-group conflict resolution among bonobo chimps, including what he has termed their "reconciliation" behavior, in "Apes from Venus," Frans B. M. de Waal, ed., *Tree of Origin: What Primate Behavior Can Tell Us about Human Evolution*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 41-68. He addresses such issues at greater length in *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000; and more generally in *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections of a Primatologist*, New York, Basic Books, 2001.

[4]   As usual, Vladimir Nabokov expresses his opinion explicitly and categorically: to identify with a character in a book is "the worst thing a reader can do" ("Good Readers and Good Writers," *Lectures on Literature*, New York, Harvest Books, 1980, p. 4).

[5]   M. M. Bakhtin, "Avtor i geroi v esteticheskoi deiatel'nosti," *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva*, Moscow, "Iskusstvo," 1979, p. 78. This unfinished

essay, which was written some time in the 1920s, explores problems in the relationship of author and hero, invoking categories of aesthetic, psychological, and ethical criticism. He devotes considerable attention to the development of *empathy* as an aesthetic category, which he calls one of the "most powerful and, indeed, thoroughly developed trends in aesthetics of the nineteenth century "(*ibid.*, p. 55). A central figure in his discussion is Theodor Lipps. As Depew explains, Lipps coined *empathy* as a modern term.

[6] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 53-54.

[7] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Michael Holquist, ed., Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trs., Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981; Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, New York, Routledge, 1990; Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, Wlad Godzich, tr., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

[8] M. M. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question of the *Novyi Mir* Editorial Staff," *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds., Vern W. McGee, tr., Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986, pp. 1-7. The Russian original was first published in 1979.

[9] The heart of this discussion is in section six of the essay (pp. 55-82), which is entitled "Expressivist and Impressionist Functions of the External Body as Aesthetic Phenomenon."

[10] The best treatment of Dostoevsky's conflation of aesthetic and ethical problems is Robert Louis Jackson, *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of His Philosophy of Art*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978.

[11] Murray Krieger, *Theory of Criticism: A Tradition and Its System*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 17.

[12] "One must not understand understanding as a translation of another's language into one's own language" (Bakhtin, *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva*, p. 346).

[13] See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 187-195. The quoted passage is from p. 194. One need not accept his insistence on the virtues of justice, courage, and truthfulness to see the compelling seriousness of practice so conceived.

[14] Lev Tolstoy, quoted in Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor, *The Architecture of **Anna Karenina***, Lisse, Peter de Ridder Press, 1975, p. 14.