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Reading for self-knowledge: Poetry, Perspective and *Narrative Justice*

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Abstract:

In this article, I offer a response to McGregor's *Narrative Justice,* in particular his notion of lucid phenomenological knowledge. By drawing on a discussion of lyric poetry, I argue that room needs to be made for the notion of perspective, which I argue is more fundamental to our engagement with works of literature than narrative. I end with a suggestion of how to extend McGregor's account in order to accommodate the idea of perspective, which I call lucid phenomenological perspectival knowledge. Ultimately, what I argue is that the knowledge on offer in one's engagement with works of literature is not coming to know what some experience is like through the narrative construction but a form of self-knowledge that is available through the perspective that shapes the work (whether a narrative or non-narrative work).

In his monograph, *Narrative Justice*, McGregor offers an argument for the role narrative can play as part of an aesthetic education of justice – a form of moral development, which, he argues, has the potential to reduce criminal inhumanity including terrorism and radical extremism by revealing the problematic master narratives that promote epistemological vices in individuals. Although he makes an important argument about the nature and value of narrative, I will argue that a look to poetry will help to see the bigger picture for what engagement with literature can offer in terms of such aesthetic education (including non-narrative works). I will offer a way of developing McGregor's theory to accommodate the role and value of poetry in aesthetic education but in doing so, I argue that what engagement with literature offers is not lucid phenomenological knowledge of something other outside our own individual perspective but a rich imaginative experience on which to test out one's perspective (and thereby put under pressure one's thinking). The difference between narrative and poetry is how and what is tested; what they have in common is the *testing* of perspective. In short, I will build on McGregor's theory in order to present a brief argument for the role and value both narrative and poetic reading plays for self-knowledge.

Lucid Phenomenological Knowledge

My starting point is McGregor's conception of lucid phenomenological knowledge: 'The realisation of what a particular lived experience is like by means of the reproduction of a particular experience of a particular character for the audience who adopt the standard mode of engagement to the narrative representation.'[1] For McGregor, this is a heightened form of phenomenological knowledge, which he defines as 'The realisation of what a particular lived experience is like' but with the addition of the reproduction of the perspective of a particular character (who then shares with the reader phenomenological understanding of what a particular aspect of lived experience is like). I am very sympathetic to the view that some knowledge is only available experientially and what works of literature can offer is a construction of a particular experience that involves characters embedded in a narrative of some sort. For instance, reading a work such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, I engage imaginatively with the character of June and reflect on the oppression that June faces as a consequence of the totalitarian state of Gilead and her determination in the face of adversity. From this, I might come to understand something about how intrusive such an oppressive regime can be and it might also raise awareness of the dangers of sexism in society.

Engagement with a character embedded in a narrative can be a source of knowledge (or at least development of understanding – a notion which helps to avoid the problems associated with propositional cognitivism). What we might gain from such an experience is coming to know the significance of something (through one's emotional engagement e.g. on responding with fear to a character in danger involves coming to appreciate that danger for that character) [2] or perhaps even developing one's conceptual knowledge by coming to appreciate the inclusion or exclusion of a particular kind of case for some concept.[3] In the task of identifying the process that underwrites such development, Tzachi Zamir argues that literature can be a source of acquiring new beliefs that are only available experientially (for instance, establishing first principles):

> 'if the literary text and its reading are persuasive, a claim is not only communicated but also justified. Rhetorical, invalid rational reasoning and the role of experience form the two constituents of such justification. These

> constituents interlock: invalid-yet-rational reasoning is *embedded within an experience, an experience that both accommodates* the move psychologically and supports the belief epistemically by becoming what may be called a 'ground' for it'[4]

According to Zamir, the experience makes a certain belief plausible/meaningful as well as providing the reader with reasons to accept the belief (in the form of the experience they have undergone). Not only does the experience of engaging with the literary text make available a particular belief to be thought but offers the means by which that belief can be incorporated into one's network of beliefs. Zamir argues: 'More than grasping propositional content, values are embedded within experiences that determine the level of understanding. Knowledge is structuralized, meaning that if one does not undergo certain experiences, one never fully understands.'[5] Understanding is not merely the case of grasping content but the significance of (and within) that content.

I take Zamir to be arguing that the literary experience is the facilitator of such belief acquisition/development (which McGregor labels as *knowledge through*). McGregor takes Zamir's view a step further by arguing that what we gain knowledge of is what a particular lived experience is like for some particular character embedded in some particular narrative (*knowledge what*). Zamir's view is compatible with the knowledge gained being something that happens on a thematic level (he gives examples of forming beliefs about parenthood and love), whereas McGregor is pointing to the knowledge gained being tied to some particular character's perspective. What we come to know is what it is like for them since, he argues, what is reproduced is a particular experience *of* a particular character. He argues that it is in virtue of the work's narrativity that we get this knowledge. However, what I will argue is that the knowledge we gain is of what it is like as embedded in a narrative (which is therefore distinct from the first personal experience of the character within the narrative, albeit a related experience).

What is meant by 'reproduction of a particular experience of a particular character'? This sounds somewhat like the view that reading literature offers its reader an experience of what it is like to be *that* character in *that* situation, in other words, knowledge gained from taking up the perspective of a particular character. It is important to note here that McGregor is not committed to the view that what literature offers is knowledge of what it is like to be that

character and to have all of the lived experiences that character has but a more modest view that the reader gains access to some part of the lived experience of a particular character. In other words, there is overlap between some aspect of the lived experience of a particular character and the lived experience of the audience engaging with the work.

To help motivate his view, McGregor gives the example of *Memento*, a film directed by Christopher Nolan about a man, Leonard, with anterograde amnesia and argues that the structure of the film reconstructs for the audience 'what it is like to have anterograde amnesia in virtue of its narrativity.'[6] The film, according to McGregor's notion of lucid phenomenological knowledge, reproduces the lived experience of anterograde amnesia of Leonard (not anterograde amnesia generally or typically). It is correct that on first viewing of the film, the audience are just as much in the dark about the reasons why Leonard is in a particular situation as the character himself but I want to push back on the thought that this overlap is sufficient to give an audience any kind of insight (or knowledge) of the lived experience of anterograde amnesia (as experienced by Leonard). That's not to say that the narrative structure of the film is not valuable, but rather a warning not to fall into the trap of thinking we know the experience of another by engaging with a representation of that experience.

As Susan Dwyer notes, we are constrained by our own perspectives. In attempting to adopt another's perspective, we are unable to do this without our own perspective in play. One's own perspective governs how we approach engagement with another's perspective. My experience of engaging with another's perspective is still *my* experience and relates to my own knowledge, awareness and ability to remember. All that is available is to attempt to grasp or appreciate another's perspective from within one's own perspective:

> 'I cannot take up your perspective on the world. I can imagine it, I can empathise with your situation, but I can never really see and experience life as you do. My grasp of your understanding and experience of things will always be mine. We are, as it were, locked in our minds. And these barriers are as relevant to my grasp of your experience of me as they are to my grasp of your experience of eating ice-cream' (2008: 6).

This understanding of perspective taking is particularly apt when considering engagement with a literary character embedded in a particular narrative since our encounter is episodic as we read a whole short story in one sitting or read a book chapter by chapter on a commute to work. One's own life and perspective exists either side of the literary encounter, and will outlive it. Furthermore, what is on offer by the work itself will always be deeply limited.

Returning to the example of *Memento* and our engagement with the central character, Leonard, we can see that although we might be invited to see the world through Leonard's eyes, we can only ever do this from our own perspective. We cannot leave our understanding, beliefs, values and commitments outside of the cinema, and they are then wholly relevant to how we engage with, respond to and experience the work. The audience does not experience anterograde amnesia but a representation of anterograde amnesia (and hence, it is not strictly a reconstruction of the lived experience of anterograde amnesia). An obvious point, but the audience watching *Memento* can do something with their experience that Leonard cannot; the audience is able to piece the episodes together and reconstruct a linear narrative from the backwards narrative they are presented with. Leonard is forever locked in his isolated short-term experiences and as we come to see, is not even in a position to trust his long-term memory which turns out to be open to corruption and misrepresentation (through the stories he tells himself). However, that does not mean that the experience of the film does not provide knowledge of what it is like. As Berys Gaut argues *Memento* 'uses its narrative structure to engage viewers' emotions and to present some intriguing claims about the role of memory and interpretation in structuring our lives.'[7] What the experience of the film offers is unique to the cinema audience and not something shareable with the character's perspective. The 'what it is like' that one has access to is what it is like to experience this story represented by these cinematic means.

What I am attempting to show is that there's an important distinction that is left implicit in McGregor's account, namely, the difference between *an experience* being available to one through literature and *an experience of the lives of others* being available to one through literature. The first is what makes engagement with literature so rewarding. The second is an impossibility and at best is an illusion. As MW Rowe writes, 'The knowledge that we derive from literature is not propositional information but knowledge of what some experience is like, and it is internally related to pleasure because the writer can only prompt us to have an experience, the experience itself must be the spontaneous product of our own imaginations.'[8]

On Rowe's view, engagement with literature is something that the reader *engages with*, they are invited to do something with the text (bring richness of meaning to the word use, respond emotionally and imaginatively to what is being represented and bringing life to that representation in the first place). The experience on offer is co-constructed by audience and text. What is on offer is a 'what some experience is like' which should be understood as the experience engaging with the text offers.

McGregor extends his notion of Lucid Phenomenological Knowledge to the ethical domain. The thesis is that what some works of literature offer is access to ethical knowledge by coming to know what a particular lived experience is like from the perspective of a particular character embedded in a narrative context. This provides the bridge McGregor needs to bring together the idea of access to ethical knowledge with the role the narrative plays in the work: 'some exemplary narratives convey lucid phenomenological ethical knowledge in virtue of their narrativity.'[9] However, there is another option if we consider the implications of the discussion above. If we take it that literature offers a valuable experience (a first-personal lived experience of a text and what it invites us to do imaginatively) rather than a valuable experience of a particular character (from the inside), then what is needed is an argument for the value of such first-personal lived experience of the text (including one's imaginative engagement) for the ethical knowledge it offers the reader and some account of how narrative is crucial in delivering that experience.

Narrative, Poetry and Perspective

As I have argued elsewhere, what brings narrative literature and non-narrative literature together is perspective.[10] Perspective is a basic form of organisation of experience, beliefs, value, understanding that is configured in a hierarchy of significance, with some beliefs, values, commitments, etc. being held as more central to one's identity and therefore weighted more heavily in how it shapes one's encounter with the world. For instance, a particular attachment to the colour red or having strong associations between the colour and danger will result in one noticing the colour more so than one without such an attachment or association. Consequently, one might be guided to act in accordance with such a preference/perception, e.g. avoiding entering a room when a red light is shown. This is similar to Elizabeth Camp's notion of perspective, which she sees as the mechanism by which we organise our thoughts, experience

and engagement with the world around us. She argues: '[a perspective] organizes [our thoughts on a topic] by imposing a complex structure of relative prominence on them, so that some features stick out in our minds while others fade into the background, and by making some features especially central to explaining others. A perspective ... gives us a tool for thinking.'[11] Each individual thinker will have their own unique perspective, which has developed from the particular set of experiences, memories, beliefs, commitments (i.e. sense of import). Not only does one's perspective capture one's identity but it shapes how one moves forward. That's not to say that one's perspective is fixed but acts as a kind of constraint, in the sense of how one engages with new experiences and thought will mean one is more open and closed to incorporating new beliefs, commitments, etc. As a result, radical change is rare; incremental change is much more likely but even small modifications to one's perspective is valuable.

Just as every individual has their own perspective, so does every work of literature. That's not to say that the perspective of a work of literature is the same as the author's of the work but that a work has a network (or configuration) of beliefs, values, meaning, etc. that is embedded in the work and gives the work a sense of coherence and unity (it is informed by the perspective of the author and may overlap with their perspective to some degree). To see the significance of perspective in literature, it is best to turn to non-narrative works such as examples of lyric poetry. Narrative is informed by perspective, therefore focusing on narrative works can obscure the role and significance of the perspective that determines what is included in a particular story and how that story is told.

As I have argued previously:

> 'In order to understand a poem, we must work out what the perspective on offer is. This does not just involve working out what the focus is on but how we ought to focus on the subject, which involves attending to the formal features of the work in conjunction with the words, images, associations, etc. The perspective offered in the poem is what binds and organizes the different aspects of the poem, which helps us to forge a network of coherent and consistent connections across the whole poem. The themes of the poem emerge from these connections.'[12]

To forge the necessary connections in order to grasp the poem's perspective, the reader must be sensitive to the words, phrases and images employed in the poem, respond to these elements, the feelings and associations they evoke and have an awareness of how these elements come together as a whole. When reading, we must try to unify our experience; what we understand from the poem must be in response to this unified experience. The experience of the perspective that configures the poem primes the reader to focus on certain aspects, since some words and phrases will resonate more strongly than others. Those words and phrases that resonate more strongly will in turn evoke richer images that have a stronger affect, which will lead the reader to carry these through the poem and connect them with other words (and their connotations), images, ideas and concepts throughout the poem. The presence of tension is consistent with there being a unified perspective that is struggling with the incorporation of a particular belief, experience or value or as a consequence of ambiguity or indetermination. The fact that one might notice any tension at all is due to the presence of a perspective since the tension is produced by the difficulty of the reader in making sense of the work as a unified whole.

To help illustrate these claims about the nature of poetry, consider the following poem by Chris Jones, 'Sentences'[13]:

> For months on Tuesday afternoons
> I'd swing and lock the three gates from staff room
>
> to B wing, then linger, pick my lines of sight
> beneath the nets and railings, Victorian light,
>
> before sidling up to Alim on the ones
> sweeping hair and skin of prisoners
>
> in little piles; and here was me
> bodied with trees, sun, asking 'where's your poetry?'

The poem is composed of rhyming couplets that connect the words to form units of meaning that don't necessarily correspond to whole sentences. These fragments suggest emphasis on certain images that form the shape of the poem thereby encouraging the reader to appreciate the same prioritising of images. A sense of significance is created by the breaking of the rhyme

in the final couplet of the first section of the poem which gives greater weight and significance to ‘and here was me.’ This sense of weight helps to express the feeling of being out of place in the way that the breaking of the formal structure of the poem feels out of place. Connecting ‘and here was me’ with the ‘little piles’ suggests a sense of the poetic persona’s sense of insignificance against Alim as he asks ‘where’s your poetry?’ There is a clear perspective that creates the sense of such a poetic persona (or voice of the poem), that is, one who is fascinated by the character of Alim. This fascination is deepened as the poem progresses with an episode recounted where Alim asks the voice of the poem to smuggle drugs into the prison:

> The day Alim asked me to bring a package in
> a sleet-wind chased its tail behind the prison.
>
> Louise, he said, would meet me in Forest Fields
> (I pictured the snow-trim on her boots and furs,
>
> the cold, pale colour of her eyes,
> her slender fingers cradling the merchandise.)
>
> I’d bear the parcel one dead afternoon
> for its contents to be thinned and spooned
>
> and wrapped – the stuff blowing out to smoke
> to dust lining toilets’ clogged-up throats,
>
> or this fine mist over the pool table’s baize;
> drifts to fleck sick-beds and guards’ dark sleeves.
>
> Alim hailed men who ambled from the showers –
> towels round midriffs, tight muscles and tattoos –
>
> ‘I need to call some friends so stay in touch.
> Louise wants to meet you very much.’

The perspective on offer in this example is one which romanticises criminal activity and ignores the darker side of drug taking in prison. For instance, the couplet ‘I’d bear the parcel one dead afternoon/for its contents to be thinned and spooned,’ shifts attention from the word ‘dead’ to the image of ‘thinned and spooned.’ Here we might detect a degree of tension in the perspective of the poem; one which on the one hand romanticises criminal activity and on the other enjoys being on the right side of the prison bars. Yet it is a perspective that sees poetry as a core value and takes a poetic perspective on both Alim and his setting. This is reinforced by the ambiguity in the title of the poem with ‘sentences’ referring simultaneously to the punishment handed down to Alim and the others in prison, and the sets of words that form units of meaning. As we have seen in this example, meaning emerges from a process of forging of connections because it results in appreciating the relationship between images, thoughts, emotions and feelings. In other words, we arrive at a particular complex network of associations which binds the elements together allowing us to grasp the work as a unified whole.

> I called a week later to ask if all was well:
> a large bloke with a stammer filled the cell.
>
> Alim had talked of a letter but his words were gone
> the way of prison yard cherry blossom.
>
> I weighted my chances of catching him in town
> ghosted in a shop front, rain-dogged, head down
>
> or grazing past him on the steps to the station:
> an arm around her waist, stopping for no-one.

The final section of the poem is filled with ambiguity that expresses a sense of hope yet loss including something left unresolved. Has Alim been released from prison? Has he been moved to another block? Did he die in prison? Despite this ambiguity, the voice of the poem continues to prioritise the poetic and romanticising of experience with the hopes of seeing Alim ‘ghosted in a shop front’ or with Louise ‘stopping for no-one.’

The complex network of associations, beliefs (assertions), and sense of value that shapes the poem provides the reader with the perspective on offer in the poem, allowing us to come to see the subject and themes from that unique view point. I do not merely mean the perspective of the poet (or even hypothetical poet), character or narrator, instead what is meant here is a particular kind of relation between the reader, their ideas, thoughts, feelings and the ideas, concepts and emotions expressed in the poem. It is this particular network of connections made that allows the reader to appreciate and engage with the perspective of the work, which is getting us to see something in a unique way. By 'see something' what is meant is not necessarily seeing the subject of the poem in a particular light but also, coming to understand an idea, thought or concept in relation to other concepts and configuration of value.

Appreciating a perspective on offer in a work is not an easy task since the way in which it configures value and belief will be different to the way in which the individual reader configures value and belief. For instance, in thinking about someone using and dealing drugs in prison, I think about life in prison as difficult and the tragedy of those individuals who continue to use or begin using in prison rather than being able to begin their journey to a successful law-abiding life outside of prison. I take it to be morally wrong to support drug-taking in prisons (unless as part of a rehabilitation programme as advised by a medical professional). However, in order to fully grasp the poem, I am asked to consider this other way of seeing significance and value in poetry and the romantic imagery associated with Alim (he is not merely a prisoner but someone who is rich in poetry), including the smuggling of drugs and drug-taking within the prison system. This places my own perspective under pressure – am I able to make sense of this other way of seeing things? How might I stretch my own understanding of life in prison and perspective in order to accommodate at least aspects of the perspective on offer in the poem? In coming to see the romantic imagery in connection with Alim's character, I do not leave behind my own understanding of prison life but begin to appreciate that there is more to the lives of such prisoners than I had first thought as well as some sense of what it might mean to live poetically. What we get from our engagement with poetry is not simply the realisation of what a lived experience is like (e.g. being a poet in residence at a prison and being asked to smuggle contraband) but the realisation of what a lived experience is like through the reconstruction of a perspective (as embedded in the structure of the poem, i.e. it's particular configuration of belief, value and significance), where the lived experience on offer is the experience of my attempts to understand another's perspective from within my own.

From this focus on poetry, I have tried to open up the idea that lucid phenomenological knowledge (as reconceived, i.e., as tied to perspective) is not as rare as McGregor takes it to be. What any good literary text does is invite a reader to engage in creating an experience of that text; what results is lucid phenomenological knowledge of the perspective embedded in the text but always approached from within one's own perspective. The other advantage is that, this extended understanding of lucid phenomenological knowledge better captures the value of the *literary* experience (of which narrative may form a part). As Peter Lamarque argues 'the great literary works—epic poems and novels—are of immense interest and their narrative structures, plots, and characters reward detailed study. But, arguably, it is not the fact that these works are narratives that gives them interest, rather the fact that they are literary narratives.'[14]

From the poetic to narrative

What literary works offer is an imaginative experience through either a poetic or narrative mode of engagement. The centrality of narrative can be preserved to some degree but as a facilitator of a kind of imaginative experience. Poetic uses of language offer a different kind of imaginative experience, one which is not focused on a sequence of events or a process of thought but a stretching of meaning, value and expression. That's not to say works of prose only offer narrative engagement – I think they do both but they will not invoke the poetic mode of engagement to the degree a poem does, which places this at the heart of how the poem works.

In my account, I want to preserve the aspect of McGregor's lucid phenomenological knowledge that demands that a reader actually undergoes an experience that is the source of the knowledge. The reader themselves live the experience rather than merely bearing witness to something. Returning to McGregor's notion of lucid phenomenological knowledge: 'The realisation of what a particular lived experience is like by means of the reproduction of a particular experience of a particular character for the audience who adopt the standard mode of engagement to the narrative representation.'[15] How we might now interpret this is to say that what a work of literature (whether narrative or non-narrative works such as works of lyric poetry) offer is:

> Lucid Phenomenological Perspectival Knowledge: the realisation of what a particular lived experience is like (of engaging with a particular text) by means

> of the reproduction of a particular perspective as configured in the work, whether that is determined by the narrative structure, the role of the narrator, or poetic structure of the work, for the audience who adopt the standard mode of engagement to the perspectival representation.

The experiential offering a work of literature provides is a chance to put our beliefs, values and commitments to the test. Rather than the cognitive gain being found in the experience that such works offer (which is often seen as a fairly naive view since we know fiction does not necessarily map on to reality) but in what pressure such experience places on one's existent worldview i.e. ones own network of beliefs, values and commitments.

What I am proposing is to hold on to McGregor's notion of lucid phenomenological knowledge but I am recommending that how we understand what that phenomenological knowledge is and what it targets should be changed. The difference between narrative and poetic is in the way it puts our beliefs, values and commitments under pressure – narratively, causally, sequentially in the case of narrative and conceptually, affectively in the case of the poetic. Such an understanding appears more easily compatible with McGregor's notion of literary thickness and anti-cognitivism. As a consequence of my view, the knowledge we gain access to through literary engagement is a form of self-knowledge (through the testing of perspective) and this is far from an insignificant form of knowledge.

Endnotes

[1] McGregor (2018) *Narrative Justice,* Rowman & Littlefield International, p 76.

[2] See Gibson, John (2007) *Fiction and the Weave of Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, in which he puts forward the idea that engagement with literature facilitates acknowledgement of the values embedded in our conceptual understanding. See also Simecek, Karen (2015) 'Beyond Narrative,' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (4): 497-513, where I argue that a reader comes to see the significance in emotional responses, which provides knowledge of what is at stake/of value.

[3] See John, Eileen (1998) 'Reading Fiction and Conceptual Knowledge: Philosophical Thought in Literary Context', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56: 331–48; see also Wilson, Catherine (1983) 'Literature and Knowledge', *Philosophy* 58: 495.

[4] Zamir, Tzachi (2007) *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama*. Oxford: Princeton

University Press, p. 14.

[5] Zamir, *Double Vision,* p. 201.

[6] McGregor, *Narrative Justice,* p. 77.

[7] Gaut, Berys (2011) 'Telling Stories: Narration, Emotion, and Insight in Memento.' In *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight,* eds Noel Carroll and John Gibson, Pen State University Press, p. 23.

[8] Rowe, M.W. (1996) 'Poetry and Abstraction' *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (1): 1-15 at 3.

[9] McGregor, *Narrative Justice,* p. 93

[10] Simecek, 'Beyond Narrative'

[11] Camp, Elisabeth (2009) 'Two Varieties of Literary Imagination: Metaphor, Fiction, and Thought Experiments,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (1):107-130, at 111. See also, Camp, Elisabeth (2011) 'Wordsworth's Prelude, Poetic Autobiography, and Narrative Constructions of the Self', *nonesite,* issue 3.

[12] Simecek, 'Beyond Narrative,' p. 503.

[13] Chris Jones (2011) 'Sentences'. In *The Forward Book of Poetry* London: Faber and Faber, p. 56-60.

[14] Lamarque, Peter (2004) 'On Not Expecting Too Much From Narrative', *Mind and Language* 19: 393–408, at 393

[15] McGregor, *Narrative Justice,* p. 76.