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Beyond Narrative: Poetry, Emotion and the Perspectival View

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Abstract

The view that narrative artworks can offer insights into our lives, in particular, into the nature of the emotions, has gained increasing popularity in recent years. However, talk of narrative often involves reference to a perspective or point of view, which indicates a more fundamental mechanism at work. In this article, I argue that our understanding of the emotions is incomplete without adequate attention to the perspectival structures in which they are embedded. Drawing on Bennett Helm's theory of emotion, I argue that the narrative view fails to take into account the influence of perspective on the emotions. In order to address this gap in our understanding of the emotions, I highlight a mode of engagement with literature that prioritises the perspectival features of a work. Focusing on lyric poetry, I argue that non-narrative artworks are best placed to highlight this fundamental aspect of our emotional experiences.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in narrative and how engaging with narratives can help us to understand ourselves and our emotional lives.¹ For instance, Alasdair MacIntyre² famously argues that we can only understand our actions and those of others as part of a narrative life.³ Peter Goldie also argues for the importance of understanding our lives as narratives, he writes, ‘our lives have narrative structure—roughly speaking, they comprise an unfolding, structured sequence of actions, events, thoughts and feelings, related from the individual’s point of view’.⁴

¹ For a good example, see Noël Carroll and John Gibson (eds), *Narrative, Emotion and Insight*, paperback edn (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

³ See Bernard Williams, ‘Life as Narrative’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2007), 305-314 for an excellent critique of MacIntyre’s claims. In this paper, Williams alludes to the importance of looking at the perspectival nature of narrative: ‘We must have a conception of what invites interpretation in these terms’ (308). See also, Elisabeth Camp ‘Wordsworth’s Prelude, Poetic Autobiography, and Narrative Constructions of the Self’, *non-site*, issue 3 (2011) who also gestures at the limitations of such narrative understanding of ourselves.

⁴ Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 4.

Within debates on the value of literature, this interest in narrative has resulted in a tendency to focus on narrative fiction thereby neglecting non-narrative literary works, such as poetry.⁵ This has led to an incomplete picture of the potential for literature to offer insights on the emotions.

In this article, I argue that by reflecting on our emotional responses to lyric poetry (which is non-narrative in structure and promotes perspectival engagement), we can see the potential for art and literature to offer more than an appreciation of narrative structures as relevant to understanding our emotional lives. In particular, by drawing on Bennett Helm's theory of emotion, I will argue that such non-narrative works can enhance our understanding of the evaluative nature of our emotional responses by making clear the influence of perspective.⁶ Consequently, at the same time as showing the importance of engaging with works of poetry, I am also showing that exclusive focus on narrative in any discussion of the emotions, as a way of arguing for the value of literature, is misleading.

2. The Narrative View

Most notably, Martha Nussbaum has attempted to build a case for narrative fiction, in particular the realist novel, as a source of insight into the nature of the emotions.⁷ Nussbaum writes, 'the novel as a form is profoundly committed to the emotions; its interaction with its readers takes place centrally through them'.⁸ Drawing a connection between the structure of a literary work and the structures of our emotions, Nussbaum argues that we can appreciate how emotions arise by studying literary narratives (and the characters embedded in those narratives), and therefore gain greater

⁵ Throughout this article, where I talk of poetry, I intend this to refer to lyric poetry, understood as poetry that is expressive and relies on the formal features of the work and the effects they produce. Although a lyric poem may include elements of narrative, the narrative is not of primary relevance to how we are to understand and appreciate the work. Our focus is not just on the story being told, but also on what is expressed. In particular, this focus on lyric poetry aims to exclude works where there is a clear and dominant narrative structure that is essential to our appreciation of the work, such as in the case of epic or dramatic poetry.

⁶ I will not be arguing for a cognitive theory of the emotions but assuming a much less contentious view that evaluations are part of an emotional experience, allowing for the possibility that emotions are connected in some way to evaluative judgments.

⁷ Other examples of this kind of thought include Amy Mullin, 'Narrative, Emotions, and Autonomy', in Noël Carroll and John Gibson (eds), *Narrative, Emotion and Insight* and John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

⁸ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 40.

understanding of ourselves.⁹ On her cognitive view of the emotions, not only do these narratives evoke emotions in the reader, but they represent forms of emotions themselves. For Nussbaum, this is because emotions involve evaluative judgments and therefore directly draw on 'beliefs about how things are and what's important'¹⁰ in the context of one's life.

Although Nussbaum doesn't offer an explicit definition of narrative, we can turn to Peter Goldie who offers a useful characterisation. He writes:

A narrative is a kind of representation of a sequence of events. It is more than just a bare collection, though; it reveals a certain coherence in what happened, configuring causal and other connections into a narratable episode or episodes. Episodes can be of long or short duration, and a narrative can be more or less coherent in the way that the various episodes hang together.¹¹

Narratives are a particular kind of organisation of events, consisting of thoughts, feelings and actions that are represented as part of a spatio-temporal sequence. We construct narratives to represent connected individual events, by selecting those episodes that appear relevant to this organisational structure, which help to form the sense of coherence of the set of episodes, that is, they can be made sense of from a spatio-temporal perspective.

Nussbaum views the emotions as having narrative structure because, she argues, the emotions are tied to our personal history.¹² In other words, our beliefs and concern for objects of our emotions develop through the

⁹ Martha Nussbaum develops this idea in her book, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: OUP, 1990).

¹⁰ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 41. For detailed criticism of the cognitive theory of emotion, see Julien A. Deonna & Fabrice Teroni, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), chapter 5.

¹¹ Peter Goldie 'Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and Planning', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009), 97–106, at 98. Noël Carroll also emphasises the causal component of a narrative, see 'On the Narrative Connection', in his *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 118–33. For Carroll there being a causal relation between events is what makes a temporal sequence a narrative rather than an *annal* or *chronicle*. For criticism of this focus on cause in narrative, see J. David Velleman, 'Narrative Explanation', *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003), 1–25.

¹² Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 236. The idea that the emotions have narrative structure is supported by a number of others, such as Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1987), Annette Baier, 'What Emotions Are About', *Philosophical Perspectives* 4 (1990), 1–29, Robert Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion & the Mind* (Oxford: OUP, 2012); 'Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and Planning' (2009); *The Emotions* (2002).

course of one's life in the way that they have promoted or harmed our wellbeing. This is reflected in the evaluative judgment at the heart of our emotional responses: 'Emotions, in short, have a history...new objects of love and anger and fear bear the traces of earlier objects; one's emotions toward them are frequently therefore also, in both intensity and configuration, emotions towards one's own past'.¹³ The thought is that by revealing the structure of our emotional experiences (i.e. what gives rise to our emotional responses as well as the emotional response itself) will provide explanation for those emotional experiences.

I will refer to the view that the emotions have narrative structure and that narrative works of art and literature are best able to provide insight into our emotional lives as 'the narrative view': this is the view I take Nussbaum to hold. On the Narrative view, the work's narrative structure (and character development through the narrative) is prioritised over the work's 'poetic' features, such as the use of metaphor, symbolism, rhyme, rhythm and other aesthetic features of language in understanding and explaining our emotional responses. On such a view, not only do we come to understand the connection between narrative and emotion, but also our own emotional responses to the work arise from our grasp of the narrative structure itself. According to this view, literary narratives are therefore important because we have an awareness of the (artificial literary) narrative structure and its relationship to what we experience emotionally.

The claim that narrative is important in understanding our emotional lives seems plausible. Novels offer us the opportunity to study narratives in relation to an emotional response we have to the novel. In addition, novels engage the reader in an emotional activity that relates to the very emotional responses of the characters contained in the novel. For example, in reading a novel such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, a reader may respond emotionally to a character's situation, such as the boy's fear, and may become frightened for him but the reader's response also relates to the narrative the character is embedded in—the reader sees the boy's emotional response as arising from the story, alongside an awareness of their own response. Consequently, this awareness of the relationship between the narrative and the character's emotional response enables the reader to appreciate how their own response relates to the narrative in the work.

This example seems to capture an important experience we can have by engaging with novels and other kinds of fictional narrative. But, is this the whole story or can literature perform a broader role than merely engaging us in narratives that inform our emotional experiences? As we will

¹³ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 175.

see, the answer lies in the thought that perspective is more fundamental to the emotions than narrative.

3. The Perspectival View

Discussions of narrative, whether in reference to a work of literature or to the emotions, often allude to a perspective of some kind. For example, people will talk of narratives being from a point of view, perspectival, representing or involving an interpretation but without making clear what this is.¹⁴ Such description of narrative indicates that there is a more basic mechanism at work that deserves closer attention. Therefore, I argue that we need to look beyond narrative structures in our attempts to gain full understanding of our emotional lives. Not only do we need an appreciation of a causal, sequential and historical relation between an object and an emotional response that the narrative view promotes, we also need to look at the more basic structure of perspective.

By 'perspective' I intend to capture something more complex than a mere point of view (which draws its analogy with a perceptual point of view). What I intend is close to the notion of perspective developed by Elisabeth Camp. She writes:

[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 often also imposes certain evaluative attitudes and emotional valences on its constituent features. Finally, a perspective doesn't just present us with a complex thought, to the effect that a host of basic-level features are related in a higher-order structure. Rather, it gives us a *tool* for thinking. Being a "tool for thought" means at least two things here. First, a perspective helps us to *do* things with the thoughts we have:

¹⁴ This point is acknowledged by Goldie, 'Narrative, Emotion and Perspective' in *Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts*, eds Matthew Kieran & Dominic Lopes (London : Routledge, 2003), 54 - 68: 'Narratives can involve internal and external perspectives or points of view ... the external perspective is always there, in spite of sometimes seeming evanescent, always shaping and colouring the narrative and indicating the narrator's own evaluation and emotional response to what happened', 55-56; see also *The Mess Inside* (2012), where he makes clear the role of perspective in forming narratives.

to make quick judgments based on what's most important, to grasp intuitive connections, and to respond emotionally, among other things. And second, it provides us with a "way to go on," incorporating new thoughts about the focal topic and often about related topics as well.¹⁵

A perspective captures a particular complex orientation (a general evaluative attitude) towards experience, which acts as a 'tool for thinking' since such an orientation will govern how we go about making sense of our experience as well as directing the thoughts and feelings we have in response to what we experience. Such a perspective will be shaped by (i) our location in space and time (and the information we have access to), (ii) what we believe the world is like, (iii) what we (personally) value and, (iv) what we take to be significant (in terms of what we are disposed to take as significant given our values and beliefs), which affects what we will attend to, the connections we will make and how we will organise our thoughts in order to make sense of our experience.¹⁶ We should therefore think of a person's perspective as a set of implicit beliefs, commitments and values, and thus determines not only what information becomes the focus of our thinking, i.e. *what* we will bring to the fore but *how* we will organise that information in bringing those features to the fore.¹⁷

4. Non-narrative Literature

In order to motivate my claim that poetry is essentially perspectival, I will draw on the experience of reading the poem 'The Butterfly Farm'. This poem does not have a narrative structure, instead, it is structured around bringing together two images (i.e. representations): a butterfly farm and women in Japanese tea houses.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Camp 'Two Varieties of Literary Imagination: Metaphor, Fiction, and Thought Experiments,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33/1(2009):107-130, at 111.

¹⁶ For a similar notion of a perspective, see A.W.Moore, *Points of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 4–6. Focusing on the nature of our imaginative engagement with fiction, Elisabeth Camp relates the notion of perspective to 'seeing-as', which captures *how* we imagine certain content as well as *what* that content is. See Camp, 'Two Varieties of Literary Imagination'. For further discussion about the notion of perspective and its importance in shaping understanding, see also Camp, 'Slurring Perspectives', *Analytic Philosophy* 54/3 (2013):330-349.

¹⁷ The notion of perspective I am developing here is influenced by Bennett Helm's notion of an evaluative perspective (*Emotional Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)), which forms a pattern of background values of the individual, those things a person is committed to holding as significant.

The Butterfly Farm¹⁸

The film of a butterfly ensures that it is dead:
Its silence like the green cocoon of the car-wash,
Its passion for water to uncloud.

In the Japanese tea house they believe
In making the most of the bright nights:
That the front of a leaf is male, the back female.

There are grass stains on their white stockings;
In artificial sun even the sound are disposable;
The mosaic of their wings is spun from blood.

Cyanide in the killing jar relaxes the Indian moon moth,
The pearl-bordered beauty, the clouded yellow,
The painted lady, the silver-washed blue.

Poet and literary critic, Ruth Padel points out that the use of metaphor in ‘The Butterfly Farm’ brings together the idea of a butterfly farm, which exploits butterflies for their beauty—where they are killed and preserved—with the idea of the treatment of women in society as represented in the Japanese tea house.¹⁹ This juxtaposition of images helps us to come to see the moral significance of exploiting beauty in our society. We come to see the dangers of attending to superficial beauty at the cost of the very thing we admire and value.

By engaging us in the image of the butterflies—their beauty set against the language of destruction (death, silence, disposable, cyanide)—we become emotionally primed in how we relate this to the role of women in the tea houses. Take for instance, the turn in feeling of the first line ‘The

¹⁸ Medbh McGuckian, ‘The Butterfly Farm’, in *The Flower Master* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1982). This poem is reprinted with kind permission from the publisher, The Gallery Press.

¹⁹ Ruth Padel, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (London: Vintage Books, 2002), 95–97.

film of a butterfly ensures that it is dead'. The use of the word 'film' suggests something delicate, fragile and the word 'butterfly' suggests something colourful and beautiful, yet the line ends with the word 'dead', which has such a definite and ugly sound. This causes a feeling of loss of beauty, and a loss of something of value. This sentiment is reinforced in line three, which follows the same pattern of feeling: 'Its passion for water to uncloud'. We therefore become emotionally primed through the way the poem brings certain features to the centre of our attention, which enables us to see beyond the superficial beauty of the images and to see that something of value is threatened.

The union of the image of the butterfly farm and the role of women in the Japanese tea house is not easy. The reader has to think carefully about how the use of language and the formal features work together in the poem in order to let connections between the images emerge. The images fuse together in the third stanza, which leaves us unsure whether we are talking about butterflies or the women. This helps us to think of the value of these women as individual human beings and not mere objects. Just as we feel loss at the death of the butterflies, we come to feel a sense of loss in the artificial treatment of women. Drawing these connections makes us sensitive to the standards we are endorsing in thinking of women in this way (as geishas). We are in effect treating them in the same way as the farmed butterflies, merely appreciating superficial beauty whilst neglecting their more significant value as living things.

As 'The Butterfly Farm' demonstrates, poetry does not always present us with a set of connected episodes, in a linear, causal sequence. Instead, poetry presents us with images, ideas, concepts, which connect in such a way that makes the experience of the whole poem meaningful with a deep sense of significance.²⁰ This shows that the perspective can come apart from a narrative structure. A perspective does not need a narrative structure to sustain it, but a narrative structure always requires a perspective.

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 organises the different aspects of the poem, which helps us to forge a

²⁰ The other poems in Padel's anthology demonstrate that this non-narrative structure is common to a great deal of contemporary poetry; the Butterfly farm is not atypical. For example, see Helen Dunmore's 'The Surgeon Husband' (which juxtaposes images of preparing salmon and performing surgery), Paul Muldoon's 'Quoof' (which brings together private language and private sexuality), or Selima Hill's 'The World's Entire Wasp Population' (which centres on a particular feeling).

network of interconnected, coherent and consistent connections across the whole poem. The themes of the poem emerge from these connections.

Here I want to draw on some ideas from Troy Jollimore, in order to tease out some important points relating to the perspectival nature of the poem. Although he's predominantly focused on metaphor, I take Jollimore's view to not only capture something about the nature of figurative language but to also tap into an important feature of our experience of poetry more broadly.²¹ Jollimore argues that insofar as we see metaphor as offering a complex representation, metaphor can be understood as perspectival: 'We are asked to view one thing in a way that is guided or informed by our awareness and experience of something else.'²² We can see this at work in the poem, where we are asked to make connections between the farmed butterflies and women in Japanese tea houses as complex representations, and not just one aspect of these images. As Jollimore argues, 'figurative language ... works in much the same way as do pictures and other visual representations: In both cases, the cognitive content they embody tends largely to shape our *holistic* apprehension of situations as a whole, rather than our atomistic perceptions of their constituent elements considered in isolation'.²³

For Jollimore, 'perspective' should be thought of as a kind of filter²⁴ following Max Black's view of metaphor.²⁵ This relates to Camp's notion of perspective, since Black, in addition to thinking of metaphorical uses of language as a filter, also emphasises the way in which metaphors organize our thoughts on a particular topic. Using the example of calling a man "wolf", Black argues that such a metaphor 'suppresses some details, emphasises others—in short, organizes our view of man'.²⁶ Developing this thought, Jollimore argues that it is through such a filter that we may be able to come to see things that are ordinarily hidden or at least, partially hidden. This is because the perspectival character of metaphor can help show something as significant by bringing some elements to the centre of our awareness (that we would not normally attend to) and leaving others at the periphery. The metaphor offers up a particular organisational framework,

²¹ It's important to note that I am not suggesting that a theory of metaphor will serve well as a theory of poetry, but there are a number of important connections, in particular the relationship between images and how that impacts our understanding.

²² Troy Jollimore, "'Like a picture or a Bump on the head': Vision, cognition, and the language of poetry.' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33/1 (2009):131-158, at 146. See Richard Moran, 'Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force,' *Critical Inquiry* 16/1 (1989), 87-112, who also views metaphor as inherently perspectival.

²³ Jollimore, 'Vision, cognition and the language of poetry', 132.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 144.

²⁵ Max Black 'Metaphor,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 55 (1954 - 1955), 273-294.

²⁶ Black, 'Metaphor', 288.

which imparts a way of making sense of these thoughts, feelings with a sense of what's of significance and value relative to other features.

When we read the poem, we are invited to see this significance in the perspective of the poem (those things presented as the focus of attention) but through our own perspective (with our own sense of what ought to be the focus of our attention). This enables us to build perspectives through the process of accommodating other perspectives (on offer in the poem). By negotiating what is brought into our frame of awareness by the poem with our own evaluation of what ought to be the focus of our attention given such a framework, we can develop our own perspectives and sense of significance by appreciating the structure of the poem:

Perception is inherently perspectival. So is understanding. But perspectives can build on perspectives, and understandings on understandings. This—the furthering and deepening of our cognitive grasp of the world, not only through the accumulation of true facts but through the proliferation of understandings—is what, for us, constitutes progress.²⁷

Such development of understanding necessarily involves both cognitive and affective grasp, as Neil Cooper argues, ‘understanding anything involves appreciating and appraising significance. In the field of human action this aspect of standard understanding is more conspicuous, for what we experience as significance is often determined by the emotions we feel’.²⁸ It is important that when engaging with the perspective of the poem that we are not doing so passively, that is, merely seeing how the thoughts, feelings, etc. come together. We must actively appreciate this perspective through our own emotional responses, which either (at least in part) support or conflict with the perspective embodied in the work and result in greater understanding.

5. Moving Beyond Narrative

So far I have outlined how poetry should be understood as perspectival. I now want to make clearer why we should think of the emotions as essentially involving perspective (as conceptually prior to narrative) and

²⁷ Jollimore, 'Vision, cognition and the language of poetry', 158.

²⁸ Neil Cooper, 'Understanding People', *Philosophy* 75 (2000), 383–400, at 385.

how the perspectival nature of poetry can reveal this feature of our emotional experiences. My claim is by reflecting on our emotional responses to poetry (particularly where there is a lack of narrative), we can explore the nature of the emotions as arising in response to the perspective of the work. The important feature of our experience of reading a poem is its ability to explore the nature of the perspectives that underwrite certain emotional responses, that is, how a particular organisation of information can give rise to a particular emotional response.²⁹

The experience of reading a poem can isolate elements of our perspectives (what we believe, value, find important), in part by showing emotions emerging in contexts that highlight just those elements without needing a narrative structure. The activity of engaging emotionally with poetry can help us to explore the nature of the evaluative aspect at the heart of our emotional experiences. Through our engagement with poetry, we can come to see how these evaluative thoughts arise and how they are embedded in our experiences.

According to Helm, an emotion is an evaluative feeling (*felt evaluation*)³⁰, which is rationally connected to other emotions, desires and evaluative judgments (but does not directly involve an evaluative judgment). In responding emotionally, we feel something as having import or significance, that is, as something worthy of our attention and action.³¹

Emotions are intentional and have hedonic valence, i.e. we have 'pleasant or painful responses to import as an intentional object that impresses itself on us in having the emotion'.³² For Helm, there are three aspects to feeling an emotion (e.g. fear): the *formal object* (e.g. dangerousness—this is what characterises the kind of emotion it is), the *target* (e.g. the thing I evaluate as dangerous) and the *focus* (which explains my evaluation because e.g. it threatens something I care about).³³ He writes:

In feeling fear, the badness of the threat is thrust upon you, grabbing your attention and moving you—literally—to respond, and this feeling of the badness of the threat just is your being pained by the danger it presents. In general, in having an emotion

²⁹ There are a number of theories of emotion which build in something like a perspective, for instance Robert Roberts (2003) argues that emotions should be thought of as *concern-based construals*, which relates to the Wittgensteinian notion of 'seeing-as'. Bennett Helm has a strongly perspectival account of the emotions, invoking the notion of *felt evaluations*, and so I will be using his theory to develop my view in relation to poetry.

³⁰ Helm, *Emotional Reason*, 34. For a good sympathetic discussion of Helm's view see Jan Slaby, 'Emotional rationality and feelings of being', in Joerg Fingerhut & Sabine Marienberg (eds), *Feelings of Being Alive* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 55-78.

³¹ Helm, *Emotional Reason*, 71.

³² Helm, *Emotional Reason*, 35.

³³ Helm, *Emotional Reason*, 69.

we feel good or bad, we are pleased or pained, not in that we have some special, non-intentional bodily sensation but rather in that we are gripped by the import of our circumstances.³⁴

Emotions are responses that frame the target in relation to the background object (the focus of my emotion) in a particular way that brings to my attention something I care about. And what I care about connects with my general values, how I see myself in the world and what is at stake for me in these circumstances. As Jenefer Robinson writes, ‘emotions are ways of focusing our attention on those things that are important to our wants, goals, and interests’.³⁵

Helm argues that ‘something’s having import is intelligible only in light of a subject’s evaluative perspective’,³⁶ which is shaped by a broad pattern of emotions and judgments, rather than by any single emotional response or evaluative judgment. This relates to my account of perspective as shaped by a set of background (or implicitly held) beliefs, values and commitments: ‘a person normally has a single evaluative perspective instituted by the commitments he makes to import, both explicitly in evaluative judgment and implicitly in his felt evaluations.’³⁷ When I explicitly judge something as something I care about, it carries normative force, therefore it will only be something I care about if I respond emotionally in a way that is consistent with this judgment. A single evaluative perspective therefore requires coherence between our judgments and emotions, in order to hold that set of things as things I care about.

Through our felt evaluations we can gain awareness of our commitment to import because in responding emotionally we see the object of our focus as a candidate worthy of our attention and action. This awareness does not necessarily give us knowledge of value but self-knowledge of our own (personal) values—our emotions reflect what import we (implicitly) take objects to have (i.e. whether they are worthy of attention), which we may then evaluate according to whether it coheres with our perspective, that is, with our pattern of felt evaluations and evaluative judgments.

Let's now turn to another poetic example, which will help to show how the poem reveals the role of perspective in our emotional responses and also where the perspectival and the narrative views come apart.

³⁴ Helm, ‘Emotions as Evaluative Feelings’, *Emotions Review* 1/3(2009), 248-255, at 253.

³⁵ Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*, paperback edn (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 126.

³⁶ Helm, *Emotional Reason*, 51.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

The Florist's at Midnight³⁸

Stems bleed into water
loosening their sugars
into the dark,

clouding dank water
stood in zinc buckets
at the back of the shop.

All night the chill air
is humid with breath.
Pools of mist

from the dark mouths
of blooms,
from the agape

of the last arum lily —
as a snow-white wax shawl
curls round its throat

cloaking the slim yellow tongue,
with its promise of pollen
solitary, alert

packed buckets
of tulips, of lilies, of dahlias
spill down from tiered shelving

³⁸ Sarah Maguire, 'The Florist's at Midnight' in her *The Florist's at Midnight* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001). This poem is reprinted with kind permission from the author.

nailed to the wall.

Lifted at dawn

torn up from their roots

then cloistered in cellophane,

they are cargoed across continents

to fade far from home.

How still they are

now everyone has gone,

rain printing the tarmac

the streetlights

in pieces

on the floor.

In this poem, there is a neatness and care expressed by the division of the stanzas on the page. When we see these words laid on the page, we recognise that this is something that has been crafted. The lack of words on the page (which almost seem like petals falling ‘in pieces on the floor’) communicates visually that this poem is composed of compressed and condensed language.

The space created on the page has a dramatic effect; it represents silence in which the reader can reflect and helps intensify the experience. Every word is equally weighted visually and so we take it that they are of equal importance to our reading experience. The white space that surrounds the words represents the silence that would be experienced on hearing the poem. The words break the silence, which leaves us—the readers—exposed to the violent language of the poem. The white space encourages us to focus on the images intensely, and therefore the violent language strikes the reader as shocking. The short stanza and line lengths act to slow down the description of the florist’s shop. This ‘slowing down’ highlights the distinct images in the poem, which encourages us to dwell on the images thereby enabling the reader to see the poem's particular organisational framework as impressing on them.

The poem presents two distinct kinds of images: the flowers and the human body. This suggests a connection between flowers and human

beings, an idea which may evoke certain thoughts, feelings, memories and associations. We then consider this connection alongside the particular way the flowers are described. We leave aside some of those thoughts, feelings, memories and associations that were evoked in the first instance in order to accommodate the new thoughts, feelings, memories, and associations evoked. The process of assimilating these elements helps to shift our perspective because it re-prioritises certain thoughts, feelings, memories, associations and emotions in our experience, i.e. the structure of the poem directs the reader in the 'way to go on' in organising their thoughts and feelings that arise in their experience of reading the poem.

For instance, our emotional response is called for in the first line of the poem with the image of stems bleeding into water. The word 'bleed' calls for such response because of its strong association with pain, danger, loss and death. This resonates throughout the poem, such as in the next stanza where we are presented with the image of 'clouding dank water', where we consider this not merely as clouded by the lost sugars of the flowers but simultaneously as bloodied water. The images are suggested in different ways: the sugared, merely cloudy water is evoked directly by the description, whereas the bloodied water comes imaginatively, by considering the image in relation to the experience of the first stanza and the emotive force of the word 'bleed'. The affective aspect of the poem is drawing our attention to words which calls for an emotional response: the affective aspects of the poem are able to emotionally prime the reader, or suggest an appropriate emotional response (in the sense that it makes sense in the context of the poem). We can think of this as providing us with a felt evaluation, which we then need to judge rationally in terms of whether we personally want to take up the attitude of import that the poem suggests.

Furthermore, consider the lines 'All night the chill air/is humid with breath' (7–8). We view this image in a particular way because of the emotional tone set by the word 'bleed'. Instead of focusing on the warmth of the humid breath, we focus on the contrast itself between the warm humid breath and the cold chill air because of our expectations of pain, danger, loss and death evoked by 'bleed'. This not only brings to mind the flowers' fight to stay alive, which we understand in terms of contrasts but also reinforces a connection to humanity; we do not normally think of flowers bleeding when we cut their stems, or breathing with dark mouths. This suggests something beyond the subject and something emotionally relevant to us as human beings and helps to begin the process of making the evaluation explicit in judgment.

Our response becomes confused on first reading as we move from the darkness of the florist's shop to the exotic brilliance of the 'last arum lily' with its shawl to protect its chance to reproduce. Such confusion calls

on the reader to make sense of this by drawing on their own perspective. This demonstrates the complexity of our emotional responses because we can see how different emotional responses can pull us in different directions and how this triggers a process of re-evaluation. As a result, we can still appreciate the beauty of the lily even whilst considering its tragedy. By presenting us with such an image, we become aware of what is at stake in the poem because the isolation and fading of the flowers overwhelms the fleeting focus on their beauty.

The sense of loss we get from the image of the stems bleeding and the inevitable failure of the arum lily to pollinate is compounded in the final two stanzas where there is no reference to the flowers; they have disappeared from the poem. All we are left with are the urban images of the dark of the tarmac and the streetlights—and even they are not left undamaged, ‘in pieces/ on the floor’ (32–3).

Although I have focused so far on forging connections as we read, the emergence of themes is not a product of a linear engagement but of how connections are forged across the whole experience itself. The poem gets the reader to move back and forth between their ideas and feelings about people and about flowers. This is achieved by mixing human images into the description of the flowers and focusing on aspects of the flowers that connect with human concerns, such as a desire to reproduce. The consequence of such shifting between domains is that we do not think about the flowers in the poem as we would ordinarily think of flowers in a florist’s shop. For instance, we do not dwell on the ordinary beauty of the flowers and see them as transient luxuries but we see them in a new light: we see their fragility in terms of their lifecycle and flourishing as a species (in relation to the individual blooms), which is brought out through the language of fragility. In this way, we can see how the perspective of the poem impresses upon us.

In trying to make sense of our emotional responses to elements in the poem, we consider possible linkages and reflect on how we have organised our responses to the poem. For instance, we come to see that violence done to commercial flowers connects well to violence experienced by uprooted people. We are able to make this connection because of the peculiar perspective the poem takes, by combining the flower imagery and human vocabulary, and by bringing an apparently ‘inert’ scene to life. This helps us to see the subject of the poem, the flowers in the florists, as representative of anyone who has been forced to leave their home: ‘lifted at dawn/torn up from their roots’ (23–4), thereby connecting these felt evaluations with explicit evaluative judgments in our project of making sense of the work. Through the experience of the poem as a complex whole, the reader discovers that she can connect her feelings toward these

apparently unrelated domains. This is in the same way that the reader makes emotional as well as intellectual connections between the two domains of butterfly farms and women in Japanese tea houses in 'The Butterfly Farm'.

The poem's perspective shapes the reader's experience, which brings the reader's own perspectives to bear. The connections we forge appear to be perspectival in nature because we do not connect all possible associations in the poem with one another but only those that contribute to a heightened sense of coherence and consistency in the poem. These connections help the emergence of themes. We see the flowers as something that has value, yet they are in danger. This perspective of the poem, which is focused on the flowers—their value and fragility—and the connection with the human domain prompts the reader to make connections between the two. As a result, we respond intellectually and emotionally to these connections in considering the relevant thematic concepts.

If the narrative view is correct, then narrative must form an important part of our emotional understanding of the poem (since it must 'represent that history of the emotion and enter into it'³⁹) but it is not obvious that there is a fully developed narrative here.⁴⁰ A narrative requires a particular kind of structuring, a developmental or causal connection between two or more events, yet in the poem we are not offered any kind of progression; we end where we start, looking through the window of a florist's shop. The emotions of the reader emerge from a development of a set of beliefs, values and concerns that we bring to the images the flowers, which we use as a tool for making sense of what we are presented with. As we read and respond to the formal features of the poem, we connect the images of the flowers to ideas of people. This process of forging connections has the effect of shifting our perspective to include values that are at stake for humans as represented by the flowers.

Our emotional engagement with the poem involves a complex network of connections and associations, rather than, necessarily, a narrative. The emotional response arises from particular connections we make and these must be evaluative in some way since we must judge them to be contributing to the meaning of the poem. Meaning-making is evaluative and the emotions can help guide us in making these evaluations in the process of making sense of something. Emotions are not simple responses to objects in the world; they are complex. Poetry expresses its themes in much the same way, as complex aspects of a poem bound up in

³⁹ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 236.

⁴⁰ Even if one is able to detect a kind of minimal (or incomplete) narrative in the poem, all we have is a narrative embedded in a non-narrative poem. This is far from a developed narrative of the sort that would be needed for emotional understanding according to the narrative view.

the experience of reading and responding to it, which emerge from the particular way the poem is organised and the interconnections it promotes.

This seems to provide a problem for the narrative view. Its main failure is to account for the reader's emotional engagement with a poem, because we do not engage with the work as a sequence of events but as an interconnected, organised network. Our emotional responses to the poem emerge due to the process of forging connections that are supported at both an affective and cognitive level. This process involves making decisions on what forms part of the interpretation. For instance, I prioritise the arum lily and the idea that it is making itself ready to pollinate when it will not be able to fulfil this because this seems a key part of making sense of the poem as a whole. I could have chosen to think about florist shops generally, focusing on the things they make, the kinds of occasions to which these flowers may contribute. My decisions are guided in part by a perspective that is on offer in the poem, i.e. the fact that the poem carefully describes the arum lily and pivots on this image, which my understanding of the poem needs to capture. Ultimately, my decisions involve bringing my own (evaluative) perspective to the interpretation of the poem in order to appreciate the need to reproduce and exist.

6. Rethinking the Narrative View

However, one might insist that engaging with poetry may require the reader to construct a narrative/narratives that are implicit in the work in order to fully understand the poem's content. For instance, I may construct a narrative to tell the story of the flowers plucked from their 'home' where they cannot flourish, but does that mean they form part of the structure of my emotional experience? Narrative may be a useful tool in helping to organise the thoughts and images in the poem, but such an organisation doesn't fully acknowledge the way the poem presents the formal features in relation to the images, thoughts and feelings expressed. We respond more immediately to these aesthetic features and only later connect them to what we are engaging with imaginatively. For instance, a narrative structure cannot capture the role of the connection between the use of emotive words ('bleed') and the white space, which we respond to immediately in addition to appreciating their wider significance. These features do not merely occur within the imaginative space of the poem (i.e. the florist's shop we are imagining), they impact on how we receive the words of the poem, before we have entered into imaginative engagement with the work. The narrative merely provides one of a number of different possible complex

organisational structures but crucially such a way of organising our thoughts in response to the poem fails to capture the importance of the affective aspects of the poem.

There is value in attending to narratives but only in the same way that rhythm, rhyme and other formal features play an important role in the reading experience. We should therefore see the role of narrative as a structural device and nothing more. Peter Lamarque takes a similar view, arguing that we must be careful not to make the leap from thinking such a device has value in the work to thinking it has wider value: ‘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.’⁴¹

Following Lamarque, I am also drawing attention to the literary quality of the narratives. Literary narratives are not flat stories but consist of characters, events, metaphor and other literary devices, which produce emotionally and imaginatively rich experiences for the reader. As Gregory Currie argues, ‘with [literary] narratives...we expect rich but bounded relations of consequence between items within the corpus, partly to keep the quantity of information manageable, but also because we are looking for thematic unity, and long chains of consequence threaten to take us away from our theme’.⁴² Literary narratives contribute to the presentation of the work but are not necessarily what shapes our emotional response to the work (although they may be part of what is responded to).

It seems that our emotional responses must be driven by factors that come prior to having grasped the narrative content in reading poetry. In fact, it seems that our emotional responses can help us to appreciate the narrative content rather than vice versa. The crucial ‘turning points’ and significant links in a narrative—the things that prompt emotion—have to involve things we care about. These elements of our perspectives have to be at work to explain how narrative events have more significance than satisfying narrative curiosity (what happens next, what causes what); they must be organised to reveal significance, which is determined by our evaluative perspective. A narrative cannot reveal this significance independently of such a perspective.

Although a story might be a way of organising and representing some set of ideas or themes, it is not the story that is of interest but what and how it represents; we respond emotionally to other formal features of the

⁴¹ Peter Lamarque, ‘On Not Expecting Too Much From Narrative’, *Mind and Language* 19 (2004), 393–408, at 393 [my emphasis].

⁴² Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 8–9.

work in addition to any narrative present. We are responding to the poem as an organised whole, as something to engage emotionally with, which includes the images, aesthetics of language and is not conducted merely in an 'imaginative' space within a story (in the sense that we respond emotionally to imagining characters in a structured sequence of events).

By attending to how our interaction with the perspective of the poem can affect our interpretation, we can come to appreciate the role of perspective in our understanding. In relation to the emotions, this is important because it can help us to understand why we respond emotionally in the way we do by revealing aspects of our evaluative perspectives.

Forging connections in a coherent and consistent way is necessary to get to an interpretation of a poem. If we merely forge connections without coherence and consistency, we are no closer to reaching a sense of what binds the poem together and are no closer to understanding. Coherence and consistency strengthens the relationship between the interpretation and the experience of reading the poem, and in turn connects felt evaluations (both our own and those constructed by the poem) with evaluative judgment.

Of course, we would not want to say that the emotions are always coherent and consistent since we are clearly capable of having unwarranted emotional responses. Poetry shows us how it can be coherent and consistent as part of an organisational framework, even though objectively it may not be well supported. Coherence and consistency are important to our emotional understanding because they deepen our emotional relationships by integrating the background object of our emotion with our worldview (i.e. our evaluative perspective).

We must always at least be responding emotionally from some perspective with some set of commitments, values and concerns, but we can interpret life differently depending on the perspective adopted (i.e. which particular set of commitments, values and concerns we bring to our experience). By engaging with poetry, we develop our capacity to forge connections, which will ultimately allow us to shift perspectives and fine-tune our emotional responses by 'building' perspectives.

In coming to understand our emotional responses to the poem, we come closer to seeing what matters to us because trying to make sense of the poem as a coherent and consistent whole will involve attempting to articulate and make sense of our emotional responses in the context of the experience of the poem. This articulation will involve recognising the implicit judgments we are making thereby connecting our felt evaluations with explicit evaluative judgments. Charles Taylor recognises that our emotions require reference to judgments in order to try to articulate them: 'many of our feelings, emotions, desires, in short much of our experienced motivation, are such that saying properly what they are like involves

expressing or making explicit a judgment about the object they bear on.⁴³ In feeling loss in reading a poem, I feel that emotion towards something. The object (or experience) matters in understanding the emotional response because my emotional response arises from my interpretation and evaluation of the poem (or aspects of the poem).

Engagement with poetic language is better placed to help us to articulate our felt evaluations and reveal import rather than actually having the experience that is depicted in the poem. This is because the poem offers a perspectively structured experience that tests the limits of our grasp of meaning and its significance for us. For instance, in the example of ‘The Florist’s at Midnight’, our encounter with the language of the poem—with the words and our responses to them—leads us to make sense of our emotional response in connection with uprooted people, that is, the way the poem presents this as significant. We can only see that there is value or significance for us if we have made sense of some action or experience, which involves describing. The language of the poem helps to express the loss of value in uprooting and this articulation helps us to get clearer about our own feelings. This is because of the negative relationship between our perspective and that of the presentation of the flowers: ‘language articulates our feelings, makes them clearer and more defined; and in this way transforms our sense of the imports involved; and hence transforms the feeling.’⁴⁴

7. Conclusion

We have seen good reason to look beyond a narrative view of the role of literature in giving insight into the nature of the emotions in favour of a perspectival view, which takes perspective as conceptually prior to narrative. We have also seen reason to attend to the perspectival nature of the emotions as separate from any narrative structure they may have in order to appreciate fully the nature of the emotions.

The important feature that emerged from the discussion of both ‘The Florist’s at Midnight’ and ‘The Butterfly Farm’ was how the poem presents the reader with a particular organisation of thoughts, feelings and sense of significance—the perspective of the work—that the reader needs to make sense of from their own perspective. Poetry can help us to understand the nature and structure of the emotions by exploring the nature of perspective

⁴³ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

itself; it enriches our emotional lives by allowing us to explore how our emotions arise from the particular perspective we have. From this experience, we gain a sense of how we focus, forge connections and how this affects our worldview.

Despite casting doubt on the narrative view as applied to poetry, I have shown that our emotional engagement with poetry has real value. As well as helping us to have a richer experience when reading, it also presents us with the opportunity to explore different perspectives and gain an appreciation of what is involved in our emotional processes more generally. This experience provides an opportunity to build perspectives, examine the perspectival structures that shape our emotional responses and to fine-tune our own perspectives through a back and forth between our felt evaluations and evaluative judgments.