Seeking the Affective and the Imaginative in the Act of Reading: Embodied Consciousness and the Evolution of the Moral Self

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Dewey believed that the disregard for aesthetic and affective factors in American schools was "the greatest deficiency in…education systems with respect to character building."[1] He maintained that the sympathetic imagination that grows out of having certain communal and intersubjective experiences is central to moral inquiry and the development of a good moral character. Effective moral education can only occur when students "happen to be already animated by a sympathetic and dignified regard for the sentiments of others."[2]

To Dewey, moral blindness and narrowness of mind were the direct result of a lack of the affective and imaginative in one's educational life. In his view, affective relations with others and with a variety of situations signified access to a landscape that would not otherwise be available. I believe that recent developments in neuroscience and the emerging field of consciousness studies are beginning to offer more adequate and embodied accounts of the structure and function of imagery and affect that can establish literary reading as precisely such a landscape.

Dewey argued vehemently that education should provide ample opportunities to examine the qualia of our subjective experience.

> Unless there is a direct, mainly unreflective appreciation of persons and deeds, the data for subsequent thought will be lacking or distorted. A person must *feel* the qualities of acts as one feels with the hands that qualities of roughness and smoothness.[3]

It was Plato who recognized that literary experience could evoke the persuasive power of the senses and feared that it could alter the moral values of individuals and society. Since then, the complex relationship between the moral and aesthetic value of literature has been subject to philosophical, critical, and pedagogical debate. In this essay, I seek to explain from an embodied perspective how literature can animate in readers both the affective and the imaginative necessary to the "sympathetic and dignified regard for the sentiments of others."[4] Furthermore, I explain how the act of reading yields empathetic identification with others as I explore the extent to which reading contributes to human consciousness and the evolution of the moral self.

Imagery, Affect, and the Embodied Mind

Terry Eagleton claims, "Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body."[5] Presently, we are witnessing a renewed interest in the physiological basis for rational thought that has given rise to the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies. Proponents of embodied consciousness and embodied cognition hold the Aristotelian view that there is no thought without an image and that imagery and affect are basic to life regulation and a developing sense of self.

Antonio Damasio describes a neurobiology of consciousness in which the brain maintains a representation of what is going on in the body.[6] Consistent with the idea

in embodied theories of cognition[7] that meaning cannot occur without the activation of images, Damasio's feeling brain is based on the premise that "the ability to perceive objects and events, external to the organism or internal to it, requires images."[8] He describes two types of images. *Somatosensory images* are images of the flesh associated with changes that occur throughout the interior landscape of the body. Examples of this type of imagery include pain, nausea, and pleasure. By contrast, *sensory images* are those associated with specialized body parts responsible for perceiving external changes such as the retina in the eye, the cochlea in the ear, the vestibular nerve also located in the ear, the olfactory nerve endings in the nose, the gustatory papillae on the tongue, and the nerves endings throughout the skin. Regardless of the type of body image, the method of production is the same. Activity in body structures results in momentary structural changes. The brain constructs maps of the changes affecting the body state in a number of appropriate regions that in turn give rise to emotions and feelings.

In Damasio's account of body and emotion, affect refers to human emotion and feeling including drives, motivation, and desires. Emotions play out in the theatre of the body. They are triggered by what Damasio refers to as an emotionally competent stimulus, which he defines as "a certain object or situation actually present or recalled from memory."[9] For example, the *actual sight* of Picasso's *Guernica* or the verbal auditory *mental representation* of Sylvia Plath's haunting recitation of her poem "Daddy" and its accompanying nonverbal visual imagery potentially serve to trigger neural and chemical responses leading to visceral changes. Feelings, according to Damasio, play out in the theater of the mind. Unlike emotions, they are not overtly detectable. In his account of body and emotion, feelings are *mental images* of objects and object-organism relationships and are always subsequent to emotions. William James too, proposed that feelings are the perception of the actual body state changed by emotion. In sum, Damasio suggests that feelings and mental images are one and the same and are inseparably linked to emotions in a complex chain of events that constitute *affect*. But, like the trace of Aristotle's wax impression, mental images of external objects and events are creations of the brain and not identical to the concrete experiences which inspired them.

Damasio contends that this sustained two-way network of emotions and feelings (images) is the bedrock of human consciousness. He claims it is so ubiquitous that at most times we are not aware of it. Jacob Bronowski argued that there is something distinctively human in our ability to use emotions and imagery in the apprehension of complex ideas and in the development and application of values, principles, and judgments.[10] As organisms develop within their environment, they acquire factual and affective experience with a range of objects and situations and this can include the lived-through experience of undergoing the text. As a result of interacting with our social and natural environments, objects and events are represented by neural patterns constructed in the appropriate sensory cortices of the brain. Gerald Edelman notes, "the patterns of nervous system response depend on the individual history of each system, because it is only through interaction with the world appropriate response patterns are selected."[11]

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Embodied Consciousness and the Evolution of Self

There appears to be no consensus among philosophers, psychologists, or neuroscientists on a single definition of consciousness. The situation is somewhat analogous to the seemingly impossible task of defining the actual moment life begins. Nevertheless, Damasio's definition of consciousness "as an organism's awareness of its own self and surroundings" provides us with some sense of how humans have evolved in such a way as to make such things as the arts, sciences, religion, and social and political organizations possible.[12] Damasio describes two types of consciousness. *Core consciousness* relates to the organism's sense of self within a present moment in time. It has to do with the sense of self that emerges in the here and now of perception and neither projects the future nor recalls the past. By contrast, *extended consciousness* is far more complex and relies extensively upon the ability to map emotional reactions and form images. It enables us to see ourselves at a particular point in time in relation to a lived past and an anticipated future. It extends beyond a basic awareness of the object-organism relationship and evolves over the lifetime of the organism. Extended consciousness depends on conventional and working memory and is enhanced by the human acquisition of language.

Damasio also offers two kinds of "self" that relate to the two forms of consciousness. The *core self* emerging from the core consciousness is a "transient entity ceaselessly re-created for each and every object with which the brain interacts."[13] What we traditionally think of as the "self," however, is connected to the idea of identity that corresponds to a "nontransient collection of unique facts and ways of being which characterize a person."[14] Damasio refers to this entity as the *autobiographical self*. The autobiographical self emerges from an organized record of past experiences of an individual organism that Damasio calls autobiographical memory. Literary reading introduces new situations that evoke affective responses and generate the formation of images that in turn contribute to the readers' autobiographical memory.

In Damasio's account: "We become conscious…when our organisms internally construct and internally exhibit a specific knowledge — that our organism has been changed by an object — and when such knowledge occurs along with the salient internal exhibit of an object."[15] Accordingly, the first function of the image is to account for the organism-object relationship to inform the organism what is happening. Core consciousness is nonverbal and, as Damasio insists, is not a postlanguage phenomenon. Extended consciousness allows us to link up these representations in a meaningful and coherent manner, a process that implicates language in considerable measure. Before considering how affective responses to literature might help us discriminate better forms of human interactions, it might be helpful to remember some of the mental abilities associated with extended consciousness and the capacity to form images and manipulate them intelligently. These include: the ability to create helpful artifacts; the ability to consider the mind of the other; the ability to sense the minds of the collective; the ability to suffer with pain as opposed to just feel pain and react to it; the ability to sense the possibility of death

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in the self and in the other; the ability to value life; the ability to construct a sense of good and of evil distinct from pleasure and pain; the ability to take into account the interests of the other and of the collective; the ability to sense beauty as opposed to just feeling pleasure, the ability to sense a discord of feeling and later a discord of abstract ideas, which is the source of the sense of truth.

Damasio suggests that the natural representation of sequences of images emerging from consecutive brain events may well be the source of the creation of drama and books. The brain most likely is obsessively engaged with wordless storytelling. Narrative storytelling probably began relatively early in terms of the evolution and development of the complex neural structures required to create brain maps. Mark Turner argues that narrative imagining is nothing less than the embodiment of our evolutionary past — a "genetic endowment"[16] fundamental to the recognition and execution of small spatial stories necessary for structuring perceptual and conceptual categories and the projected animation of objects and events with a disposition toward survival and a developing human mind. Suzanne Langer's assertion that imaging and wordless storytelling precedes language and was, in fact, a condition for language to emerge,[17] challenges the Cartesian dualism in prevailing computational theories of the mind modeled on a universal case grammar and the construction of abstract amodal propositions. Also of significance, Damasio contends that the philosophical problem of intentionality — that is to say, that mental events are always directed toward or "about" something external to the mind — relates to the brain's disposition for storytelling.

Dramatic Rehearsal

Dewey contended that the ability to reach beyond the surface of things and understand others through sympathetic communication requires imagination and not the mere transformation of knowledge. Mark Sadoski defines imagination as the "normal, essentially human, mindful activity that we engage in from moment to moment" as "we manipulate parts of existing images into new combinations and/or when we enrich images with affective associations."[18] Similarly, Dewey describes imagination as "the gateway through which these meanings [derived from past experience] can find their way into a present interaction or rather…the conscious adjustment of the new and the old…."[19] The Romantic view of imagination as "flights of fancy" ensured that imagination has been seen as purely subjective and without relevance to the human capacity for reason. Yet, as Dewey contends, "The imagination is as much a normal and integral part of human activity as is muscular movement."[20] According to Dewey, "all *conscious* experience has of necessity some degree of imaginative quality."[21] Arguably, from a pragmatist and evolutionary perspective, the most important function of imagination is that it allows us to internalize a situation according to past experiences and act in the present in anticipation of future possibilities.

For Dewey, the aesthetic and imaginative of the literary experience and its potential for moral communication are realized as readers engage in the process of what he termed dramatic rehearsal.[22] Within the literary context, dramatic rehearsal allows readers to achieve empathetic identification with a character or characters. It

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entails placing readers in a morally problematic situation in which they seek possible solutions by imagining alterative actions and projecting themselves into the situation as active participants. Dramatic rehearsal relies on our capacity to access, recombine, and reconfigure images to project small spatial stories or dramas. As an act of cognitive appraisal grounded in perception, Dewey's dramatic rehearsal is not enacted in moral certitude, but remains subject to revision.

Historical Agency and an Emerging Sense of Self

Empathetic identification and embodied consciousness are at the heart of Lynn Hunt's quest for a post-Foucaultian history of personhood. Hunt argues that human rights are comprised of "a set of feelings about how bodies should be treated (and were experienced) and about how selves worked (and were experienced)."[23] A *dix-huitièmiste* and an expert on the French revolution, Hunt contends that the epistolary novel played a critical role in the development of human rights. Her recent work also happens to benefit from the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies and its emphasis on feelings. She suggests that the current academic furor surrounding emotions relates to the fact that emotions are both bodily and mental, experienced as biological change and as a mental event. Based in both Merleau-Ponty's and Damasio's "materialist understanding of the self in which…consciousness grows naturally out of sensation."[24] Hunt rejects the idea that the self is either freestanding or completely socially constructed, asserting rather that it exists embedded in the body and is cognizant of its role as an agent of the body's action.

Hunt explains how moral autonomy and its corollary human rights depend on individuals experiencing a separateness of self associated with the body's bounded space and at the same time, maintaining a conviction that others experience this same sense of self. In other words, the affective energy associated with democracy and the development of human rights requires the belief that all people have the same kinds of inner experience including similar experiences of bodily pain. Hunt notes that, during the eighteenth century, something remarkable occurred to advance this understanding of separateness or self possession and the empathy that comes with knowing that all others are equally self possessed.

Without discounting other factors which invariably contributed to the emergence of human rights — for example, changes in natural law theory, the growing spread of consumerism, commercialism, and urbanization, and the Enlightenment — Hunt traces their development to the appearance of the epistolary novel in the mid-eighteenth century. She points out that three great psychological novels — Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa* and Rousseau's *Julie* — more or less coincided with the appearance of the phrase "rights of man" in Rousseau's *Social Contract*. More importantly, the epistolary novel, Hunt argues, produces a "sense of interior likeness" whereby we are able to identify empathetically with individuals imagined to be fundamentally like ourselves.[25] Similarly, Ian Watt, in his study of realism in the novel pointed to Richardson's "use of the letter form that induced in the reader a continual sense of actual participation in the action which was until then unparalleled in its completeness and intensity."[26]

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Hunt's theory connecting the epistolary novel with the origins of human rights would appear to support my argument that images and emotional responses emerging from the literary experience contribute to a developing sense of self and an expanding moral consciousness. Basically, Hunt maintains that reading epistolary novels produced somatic effects that once mapped and stored in the brain came back out as new concepts about the organization of social and political life. This reorganization entailed new ways of empathizing. Ultimately, Hunt is arguing that social and political change occurs not just because people inhabit a particular social or cultural context, but, moreover, because through their interactions with each other, even vicarious ones, they recognize that they share similar experiences. This self-other co-determination emerges from an affective network of neural and somatic activity.[27] Hunt contends that these affective experiences alter individual minds and contribute to a changing social context. Nevertheless, individual experiences will vary conditioned by the ongoing embodied awareness and action of each person.

Empathy depends on the reader's capacity to form the necessary images of a particular character and affectively project upon those images common traits and experiences that promote feelings of interiority, that is to say, the feelings that suggest that this character is in possession of a sense of self equal to that of the reader. In other words, empathy requires identification. Hunt summarizes Diderot's compelling description of empathy and identification evoked during reading that prefigures Dewey's dramatic rehearsal:

> You recognize yourself in the characters, you imaginatively leap into the midst of the action, you feel the same feelings that the characters are feeling. In short you learn to empathize with someone who is not yourself and can never be directly accessible to you and yet, who in some imaginative way also yourself.[28]

Diderot was also one of the first to recognize how readers can be drawn into oblivion through identification with a novel's characters and how this unconscious participation could lead to moral inquiry without the didacticism associated with explicit moralizing. In response to Richardson's *Pamela*, Diderot commented: "One feels oneself drawn to the good with an impetuosity one does not recognize. When faced with an injustice you experience a disgust you do not know how to explain to yourself."[29] Similarly, Merleau-Ponty elaborated: "The wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion: my eyes follow the lines on the paper, and from the moment I am caught up in their meaning, my eyes and body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation."[30] The page becomes a source of consciousness and consciousness for Merleau-Ponty is located in the body that keeps "the visual spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system."[31]

Edelman provides an epigenetic account of consciousness whereby the morphology of the brain — that is, the shape of cells and the development of tissue form that determine the function of the various regions of the brain — continues to evolve as organisms interact with their environment. Hunt's theory draws from the reciprocity that inheres in an epigenetic account of consciousness and contends that

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important changes must take place in people's brains before new social practices can begin. The self is not, as we read in Foucault, simply a product of body disciplines imposed from without. Historicity of personhood, Hunt claims, works in more than one direction. Reading the epistolary novel in the eighteenth century led to new individual experiences. The bodily sensations associated with these experiences translated into perceptions of individual personhood and subsequently to new social and cultural practices. Such changes do not occur all at once, and historical change is bound to be a messy process, but one in which narrative plays a critical role. Hunt's theory and embodied consciousness go a long way to providing a plausible explanation for Kearney's following observation:

> It is, in short, only when haphazard happenings are transformed into story, and thus made memorable over time, that we become full agents of our history. This becoming historical involves a transition from the flux of events into a meaningful social or political community — what Aristotle and the Greeks called a polis. Without this transition from nature to narrative, from time suffered to time enacted and enunciated, it is debatable whether a merely biological life (*zoe*) could ever be considered a truly human one (*bios*).[32]

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, in this era of educational accountability where corporate rhetoric and outputs have defined the work of literacy instruction, it is difficult to promote the idea that we should value the act of reading as a means of animating moral and social imagination. In the constant rush to prepare students for global economic competition, there is a persistent disregard for the affective and the imaginative. Far too often, the unrestricted chance to examine the qualia of our subjective experience through aesthetic responses to literature is preempted by the belief that literature can be used to directly teach specific morals and attitudes.

I am mindful that any theory that posits a relationship between empathetic identification and the development of the moral self may be construed as a justification for literature education on the basis of what Deanne Bogdan terms its "transfer-value humanism."[33] For years, Bogdan has wrestled with the idea of the civilizing power of literature. She recognized that Plato's concern about the psychological effects and moral consequences of poetry foreground contemporary critical problems related to censorship, justification, and response. Milan Kundera contends, however, that knowledge is the novel's only morality.[34] From this perspective, empathetic identification animates moral imagination insofar as it unlocks what may be hidden and unseen in our experience. It acts as a vehicle for breaking down resistance to knowing but, I argue, requires both the chance to undergo the text and our thoughtful and critical reflection. In the existentialist tradition of Simone de Beauvoir, literature education might begin by understanding "the fact that no behavior is ever authorized to begin with, and one of the concrete consequences of existentialist ethics is the rejection of all the previous justifications which might be drawn from the civilization, the age, and the culture; it is the rejection of every principle of authority."[35]

Literature, like most things in this world, is not emotionally neutral. Emotions and images evoked during reading are modulated and often suppressed according to

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the socio-cultural positioning of the reader. While our ability to reason ensures that emotions are not the sole arbitrator of good and evil, the emotions and the resulting mental imagery activated during literary transactions contribute to the individual buildup of personal knowledge about the social world and our ability to categorize experience in our autobiographical memory.

Hunt's theory of a post-Foucaultian history of personhood begs a response to the question voiced by neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux in dialogue with Paul Ricoeur whether it is "possible to pass from the evolution of species, a genetic phenomenon, to cultural evolution via the epigenetic neural evolution of each individual."[36] Those looking for psychological facts may still be left wanting, for Changeux and Damasio concede that the neurobiological investigation of consciousness has been problematic since consciousness has traditionally been considered a subjective, first person phenomenon and, until recently, a subject largely reserved for philosophical and psychoanalytical study. Throughout this essay, I have attempted to link recent neurobiological accounts of mental imagery and affect with the phenomenal act of reading in the spirit of Husserl's eidetic psychology. While I believe that affective responses and the formation of imagery evoked in the act of reading are a result of neural connectivity and eventually stored in our autobiographical memory, a reflective effort is needed to clarify the growing body of physiological evidence through direct contact with our own experience. Knowledge about brain activity can never fully account for human behavior. As Edelman states, "[t]he brain and the nervous system cannot be considered in isolation from the states of the world and social interactions….[S]uch states, both environmental and social, are indeterminate, and open-ended."[37] Hopefully, I have made it sufficiently clear that I am in no way suggesting that human experience can be reduced to psychological experimentation, but rather, that our understanding of the structure and function of imagery and affective might provoke new insights into how literature has interacted with individuals and societies throughout history.

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