When Fiction Feels Real

Representation and the Reading Mind

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How can nineteenth-century novels bring readers into intimate relation with fictional persons and worlds that seem distinct from the text itself? In a response to *Emma* that Jane Austen recorded in 1815, Charlotte Cage reported, “I am at Highbury all day, & I can’t help feeling I have just got into a new set of acquaintance.” More than half a century later, Margaret Oliphant said of *Pride and Prejudice*, “The household is not described, but rises vividly before us as if we had visited it yesterday.” Charles Dickens declared in a letter to George Eliot that *Adam Bede* had “taken its place among the actual experiences and endurances” of his life. And when *Anna Karenina* appeared in English translation in 1886 after being serialized in Russia during the 1870s, William Morton Payne marveled that “few works of fiction” produce “so strong a sense of reality” as Tolstoy’s novel, observing, “We seem to look upon life itself and forget the medium . . . through which we really view it.” Writing in the twenty-first century, J. Hillis Miller suggests that nineteenth-century novels have not entirely lost their original powers, crediting them with the capacity to come “alive as a kind of internal theater that seems in a strange way independent of the words on the page.”

Although this phenomenon is familiar to many readers, it has been remarkably resistant to critical examination, in part because the experience of reading is so difficult to describe. Readers routinely reach for metaphors like being lost in a book, seeing with the mind’s eye, being transported to another world, and becoming friends with fictional characters. These conventional expressions all convey a sense that novels give rise to experiences that transcend the physical act of reading, but they tend to overstate the case, obscuring the complex ways in which a reader’s impression of fictional persons and places is mediated by language and by the reading process itself. To make matters worse, these hyperbolic claims reinforce the view within literary studies that such reader responses are naive, nonintellectual, even regressive. I propose a different approach. What if
we understood the claim that novels seem to "come alive" not as a distraction from more important forms of engagement with literary texts, but rather as an effect whose persistence suggests that producing it is fundamental to the craft of fiction? What if we saw the absence of a sophisticated vocabulary for talking about literary experience not as a sign that it cannot or need not be examined in a serious way, but rather as evidence of how desperately we need more effective methods for investigating it?

This book offers readers and critics a sharper set of tools for thinking about effects that are central to literary experience but remain on the periphery of literary studies, such as how the words of a novel can seem to evoke immediate sensory experiences and how fictional persons can continue to endure in a reader's mind long after a story has faded. By engaging with well-established concepts and models from the psychology of reading and cognition, I chart a new path forward for studying the relationship between novelistic technique and reader response. Since Stanley Fish's pivotal claim that readers construct the meaning of literary texts according to procedures determined by their interpretive communities, thinking about how texts themselves can influence a reader's experience has come to seem like a naively formalist pursuit. The study of reading has centered instead on how the practices of individual readers reflect their personal identities, their social groups, widespread cultural attitudes, and large-scale institutional conventions. Yet as Fish himself would eventually concede, literary texts do have properties that are independent of the interpretive apparatus we bring to them—properties that play a role in the experience of reading. By attending to how novelistic techniques can shape a reader's impression of fictional persons and things, I aim not to turn back the clock on how we think about reading, but to bring the formal features of specific texts back into our study of literary experience. When readers from the nineteenth century to the present credit novels like *David Copperfield* and *Villette* with the capacity to evoke "a world more alive and dimensional than this world," they describe an effect made possible not just by what readers bring to a text but also by what these texts present to their readers.

At the same time that readers are influenced by multiple, interconnected factors that operate at different scales, the activities involved in reading or responding to a literary text can be understood along a continuum that ranges from perceiving and recognizing words on the page to parsing sentences, to comprehending narrative content, to reflecting on character and action, to the more specialized procedures involved in critical interpretation. Yet when literary critics and especially reader-response theorists talk about reading, they often have a quite specific activity in mind, which is the construction of interpretive meaning. Although all the mental operations that readers perform can be categorized as interpretive acts because they involve various forms of inference making, our discipline has drawn an implicit distinction between the processes involved in merely comprehending a text and those that result in an interpretive reading. John Guillory goes so far as to suggest that literature students must undergo a "conceptual break" with the stage of comprehension before the more sophisticated stage of interpretation can begin. This book approaches comprehension not as a stepping stone on the path to interpretive meaning but as an aesthetic end in itself. By focusing on how nineteenth-century novels invite readers to feel as though they have come to know unreal persons, places, and incidents in unexpectedly intimate and durable ways, I demonstrate that "uncritical" reading can be an object of study that repays serious critical attention. Keeping the spotlight on comprehension opens up a new dimension of literary representation, attuning us to the different strategies that nineteenth-century novelists use to evoke fictional persons and scenes in a reader's mind. Moreover, as I discuss in a subsequent section on literary realism, these strategies reveal how reading fiction that feels real is distinct from perceiving things that are real.

Inside the Reading Process

How comprehension works is still very much a black box in literary studies, but a number of critics have made major attempts to demystify it. In 1938, Louise Rosenblatt described reading as a "transactional" process in which writers stimulate readers to draw on their own linguistic and life experience as part of grasping the content of literary texts. A year earlier, the Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden had completed his account of how readers "concretize" a literary text by making inferences about the unspecified attributes of fictional characters and settings. In the 1970s, Wolfgang Iser would build on Ingarden's work, focusing on how the juxtaposition of discontinuous perspectives within a narrative can incite readers to make inferences about how those perspectives might be reconciled. But while both Ingarden and Iser offer remarkably sensitive insights into the reading process, many of these insights are obscured by a methodological tendency to use the same terminology to describe mental acts that are actually quite distinct.

If the aim of phenomenology is to characterize conscious experience as it is experienced instead of breaking down an experience into component parts that can be individually examined and explained, the latter project falls within the sphere of cognitive psychology. For many literary critics, however, the pairing of literature with psychology has seemed like an unnecessary foray into foreign territory. Their skepticism has been exacerbated, on the one hand, by a popular media that often reduces the study of cognitive processes to neuroscience and, on the other hand, by the tremendous success of scholarship on Theory of Mind.
within cognitive literary studies. But far from being all about the brain or being all about interpreting other minds, perspectives from cognitive psychology can enrich our understanding of topics that have fascinated a long line of humanists, including perception, attention, memory, imagination, emotion, and learning. These topics were also of interest to the nineteenth-century psychologists who have begun to receive increased attention in scholarship on literature and the history of science. The proximity between the ideas pursued by Victorian empiricists and more recent research on the mind is due to the singular disciplinary history of psychology itself. Because the study of mental processes fell out of favor among early-twentieth-century psychologists, it was not until the cognitive revolution—or counterrevolution—of the late 1950s and early 1960s that the mind regained its status as a major object of psychological inquiry. Despite the computational connotations of the so-called cognitive turn, this disciplinary reorientation toward the mind led contemporary psychologists to investigate mental operations that their nineteenth-century forerunners similarly sought to understand.

One area of cognitive research that has especially rich implications for literary criticism is the psychological study of the reading process. Since the 1990s, psychologists and literary critics have explored the potential for empirical research on reading to advance our understanding of literary experience. Whereas their work provides sweeping accounts of how readers make sense of a broad range of narratives, my focus is much narrower. By applying sustained attention to a small set of texts within the tradition of nineteenth-century realist fiction, I make a case for how the psychology of reading constitutes a body of knowledge that can be valuable—even vital—to all literary scholars, not just to those working within narratology or cognitive literary studies. Namely, a more precise understanding of the reading process enables us to revisit and revise long-standing assumptions about what happens when we read, what novels do to their readers, and how language works.

One such assumption, made by the novel's earliest critics, is that reading fiction is a dangerously passive, even mindless activity. Research on discourse comprehension presents a significant challenge to this view by illuminating the many cognitive processes involved in seemingly effortless reading acts. The prevailing model of text comprehension, first proposed by Teun van Dijk and Walter Kintsch in 1983, distinguishes between three different levels of representing a text in memory: the surface code, the textbase, and the situation model. The surface code consists of the exact wording and syntax of a text, such as George Eliot’s description, in *Middlemarch*, of “Mrs Garth, with her sleeves turned above her elbows, deftly handling her pastry—applying her rolling-pin and giving ornamental pinches.”

The second level of representing a text in memory is the textbase, which consists of the propositional content expressed by the surface code. Regardless of whether the text states that “Mrs Garth is handling her pastry deftly” or that “the pastry is handled deftly by Mrs Garth,” the underlying proposition expressed by both discursive formulations is more or less the same.

The third level of representation, the situation model, consists of a mental representation not of the linguistic features of the text itself but rather of the state of affairs being described. Here the words of the text cue readers to draw upon their existing background knowledge, such as what kind of object a rolling pin is or what it means to pinch something, to construct a mental representation of the manual operations that Mrs. Garth performs upon her dough.

Whereas readers typically do not retain in long-term memory the exact words of the surface code or the propositional content of the textbase, they can often recall the situation model even after they have finished reading. Here we might think of how readily readers can recall the gist of a story despite being unable to remember it word for word. Because the structure of the situation model corresponds to that of the physical world instead of to the linguistic structure of the text, it helps us account for an aspect of literary experience that readers and critics have struggled to pin down. This is the level of representation. J. Hillis Miller describes when he says that the text of a novel “comes alive as a kind of internal theater that seems in a strange way independent of the words on the page.” And although Roland Barthes dismisses the significance of the “referential illusion,” declaring it irrelevant to the reader’s pursuit of meaning, discourse psychologists suggest that readers necessarily construct a freestanding situation model as part of comprehending a text.

Many of the activities that readers and critics routinely perform when reading and reflecting upon a novel depend on mental representations of the situation model. In *Anna Karenina*, for instance, Tolstoy famously narrates the same scene twice, representing the steeplechase first from Vronsky's point of view and then, a few chapters later, from Anna's. Readers can integrate the account of Anna's perspective into their existing representation of the steeplechase by retrieving and revising their situation model of this episode. It is also this level of representation, which corresponds not to language but to the structure of the physical world, that allows readers to compare the staging of Levin's mowing scene in a film adaptation with its representation in the text. Moreover, the situation model enables translators to compare multiple English translations of the novel with the original Russian text and allows cultural historians to compare Tolstoy's fictional representation of the Russian gentry with depictions of nineteenth-century Russian life in newspapers, photographs, letters, and other historical sources.
To be sure, thinking about how readers construct, retrieve, and revise mental representations of text content necessarily proceeds at a certain level of abstraction. No two occasions of reading are ever exactly the same, not just for different readers within the same interpretive community but even for the same reader, who may approach a single text with a variety of reading goals, fluctuating levels of motivation to pursue those goals, and newly acquired domains of background knowledge, to say nothing of the reader’s variable moods, preferences, and physical surroundings. Psychological efforts to develop an architecture for reading do not discount these individual differences but are pitched at a level of analysis that makes it possible to identify a set of processes that many reading acts share. Ironically, this more abstract model of what reading involves in turn makes it possible to develop more sensitive and supple accounts of how specific cultural and material conditions might affect actual communities of readers. Scholars can become attuned to how some of the conditions that contribute to a reader’s experience have transformed more rapidly than others, as well as to the fact that not all of these transformations affect every aspect of the reading process in exactly the same way.

For instance, the narrator of The Mill on the Floss notes that, whenever Maggie Tulliver reads The Pilgrim’s Progress and comes to the sentence about Christiana “passing ‘the river over which there is no bridge,’” an image of the Floss comes to Maggie’s mind. There are many factors unique to the specific instance of reading that George Eliot describes, from the prominent place that the local landscape occupies in Maggie’s background knowledge to the material properties of her edition of Bunyan’s text, to the degree to which she has learned to approach a Christian allegory. Whereas the material properties of the book may affect the ease with which Maggie deciphers the words and sentences on the page, they play a lesser role in her ability to retrieve embodied knowledge of “the river over which there is no bridge.” And while Maggie may not go on to perform the inferences necessary for grasping Bunyan’s allegorical meaning, she may be skilled at constructing a situation model of the incidents that the text describes. Between the seventeenth-century publication of The Pilgrim’s Progress and the scene of reading depicted in The Mill on the Floss, and between the publication of Eliot’s nineteenth-century novel and our present moment, not every aspect of the reading process has changed to the same extent.

Indeed, in an 1855 account of how readers and listeners mentally represent verbal information, the Scottish psychologist Alexander Bain draws a distinction between being able to recall the exact words of a description and being able to recall the objects that have been described. He reports that while he can perceive “a train of words dropping” on his ear that he might recall and recite to someone else if he had a perfect memory, there is also a “series of views of objects—of mountain, river, plain, and forest” that he pictures in his mind and can retain in his memory “independently of the language used to suggest them.” Bain’s observation that the comprehension of verbal description involves two formally distinct mental representations bears a striking resemblance to the distinction that late-twentieth-century psychologists have drawn between the surface code and the situation model. This is not to say that certain aspects of reading are universal or transhistorical, but to suggest that, in order to develop more nuanced approaches to the history of reading, we need to consider scales of time that do not always fit neatly within conventional disciplinary periods. After all, as William St Clair and Jonathan Rose remind us, nineteenth-century novels themselves did not become widely read until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

If cultural lag defines the reception of nineteenth-century fiction, the capacity for these novels to produce experiences that readers describe as lifelike also extends beyond the moment of publication. A hundred years after Charlotte Cage reported that she was “at Highbury all day” when reading Emma, Virginia Woolf described each of Austen’s novels as “a little living world.” More recently, Adela Pinch observes that, in Persuasion, the “presence of other people are apprehended as insistently sensory phenomena.” What is it about Austen’s novels and other literary works written within the same tradition that has prompted generations of readers to claim that the experience of reading them “feels real”? And what do readers even mean by this claim? This book models how close attention to novelistic technique, informed by psychological research on the capacities of the reading mind, can help us understand how realist writers seem to transcend the limits of their verbal medium.

The Psychology of Fictionality

Something that has not radically changed since the rise of the novel, and is crucial to our understanding of literary realism, is the ease with which readers can become engaged in texts that they know to be works of fiction. When novel readers find out how various members of the Bennet family behave at the Netherfield ball in Pride and Prejudice or about Michael Henchard’s death in The Mayor of Casterbridge, they can, in the late-eighteenth-century words of Clara Reeve, seem to be “affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were [their] own.” How audiences can be affected by incidents that they know to be fictional is a long-standing philosophic paradox. This paradox rests on an assumption that it is irrational, perhaps even impossible, to experience real emotions about objects that one knows to be unreal, and solutions to it have taken four main approaches.
In the first approach, philosophers claim that, although the emotions that novel readers experience are real, these emotions are not responses to fictional characters and incidents themselves. Rather, they are responses to the general referential types and abstract truths that particular fictional characters and incidents represent. According to this view, the source of our pity at the close of The Mayor of Casterbridge is not the fate of Michael Henchard himself but the tragedy that can befall actual persons who resemble Henchard in real life. Kendall Walton takes an inverse approach in Mimesis as Make-Believe, proposing that audiences respond to what is depicted in a fictional work not with real emotions, but with make-believe “quasi emotions.” For Walton, reading a novel or viewing a film is analogous to children engaging in a game of make-believe in which they play along with an imaginary scenario. By extension, when audiences experience fear and anxiety in response to threatening images on a movie screen, they do not flee from the theater because their emotional response is part of the pretense.

Neither of these explanations, however, seems to capture the precise nature of emotional responses to fictional representation. Our response to Michael Henchard’s tragic fate really seems to have something to do with Henchard himself instead of with an abstract category of actual persons who might resemble him. And just as perceiving images that appear on a screen is distinct from willfully inventing the incidents that unfold in a game of make-believe, emotions aroused by a film seem qualitatively distinct from emotions that we only pretend to have. Thomas Pavel, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Lubomír Doležel thus propose an alternative approach, resolving the problem of reference in fictional narratives by adopting the modal logic of possible worlds semantics. For them, readers stand in relation to fictional worlds in much the same way that they stand in relation to counterfactual narratives about the actual world. As Ruth Ronen and Catherine Gallagher point out, however, thinking about fictional worlds as alternatives to how the actual world might have been involves a logical step that many novels do not require readers to take.

A fourth approach has been to challenge, on psychological grounds, the philosophic premise that we cannot experience real emotions unless we believe that the object of those emotions is real. From a cognitive perspective, our ability to make judgments about the ontological status of a text, such as recognizing that the story we are attending to belongs in the category of fiction, operates independently of our ability to comprehend and respond to the contents of the story itself. Samuel Taylor Coleridge noted in 1816 that “Images and Thoughts possess a power in and of themselves, independent of that act of the Judgment or Understanding by which we affirm or deny the existence of a reality correspondent to them.” We find contemporary support for this view from the media theorists Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass, who observe that audiences in a theater immediately and automatically orient themselves toward perceived motion and sound coming from a stage or screen and cannot help responding to it in social ways. Reeves and Nass suggest that, far from being irrational, it is entirely natural that a perceptual system designed to respond rapidly to potential threats makes no distinction between actual and mediated motion and sound. Psychologically, there is no “switch in the brain” that can be flipped to deactivate our responsiveness to perceived stimuli in the event that they are coming from an artificial source. Even though the members of Walton’s audience are fully aware that they are sitting in a theater, telling themselves that they are only watching a movie may not diminish the emotions they experience in response to the sounds and images before their senses.

William Flesch furthermore suggests that, from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, our social investment in monitoring who gets punished or rewarded for their behavior extends to stories about fictional actors and events. Flesch argues that, for members of social groups, the activity of monitoring who does or does not display altruism and cooperation is at once a source of pleasure and an altruistic and cooperative act in itself. As social observers, novel readers may become so invested in monitoring whether villains are punished and heroes are rewarded that, when Denis Diderot cries out to Clarissa Harlowe, “Don’t believe him! He’s deceiving you!” he can remain fully aware that Clarissa is a fictional character and still hope that the virtuous heroine is not unjustly harmed by the villainous Lovelace.

If our assessment of a novel’s ontological status does not diminish our ability to respond to its contents in social and affective ways, we can more precisely specify how readers relate to fictional narratives. Just as members of the audience at a play can shift from recognizing that the persons standing before them are actors to focusing on the action unfolding onstage, novel readers need not continuously dwell on the fact that they are reading a fictional work but can instead become absorbed in comprehending what the text describes. Indeed, Catherine Gallagher argues that knowing a story is fictional can even license readers to become more invested in its characters and incidents—to perform the “willing suspension of disbelief” that, for Coleridge, constitutes “poetic faith.” Although Coleridge’s use of the terms “faith” and “disbelief” makes it easy to mistake his meaning for temporarily permitting oneself to believe in the reality of fictional persons and events, what he has in mind has to do not with our ontological attitude toward a story but with our epistemological stance. To suspend our disbelief is to accept the text as a reliable account of the represented fictional events. Instead of questioning the plausibility of Clarissa’s actions at every turn, readers who have suspended their disbelief trustingly rely on the narrative information that Richardson’s text provides.
Of course, not all readers so willingly submit to what a literary text describes. Some may be bored, distracted, or resistant; others may be irritated, confused, or overwhelmed. For those readers who do bend themselves to the task of comprehending the text, however, their attention can quickly become occupied by the continuous stream of information about different fictional characters, their interior experiences, and their directly reported speech; about the physical properties of the setting and the passage of time; and about the unfolding sequence of events. Because readers do not have infinite attentional resources with which to keep track of multiple dimensions of the story, they can become so absorbed by the act of reading that they feel completely immersed in the text. Nevertheless, becoming deeply engrossed in comprehending a novel does not undo a reader’s earlier judgment about its fictionality. Rather, readers simply do not continue to focus on the fact that the represented persons and places are fictional unless directed by the text to do so.

Because the demanding task of comprehending a text can absorb our attention for sustained periods of time, we often forget how agile our attention actually is. Consider, however, the opening sentence of chapter 11 in Jane Eyre:

A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play; and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see a room in the George Inn at Millcote, with such large-figured papering on the walls as inn rooms have; such a carpet, such furniture, such ornaments on the mantel-piece, such prints, including a portrait of George the Third, and another of the Prince of Wales, and a representation of the death of Wolfe.

Here we might be struck by Jane’s self-conscious act of undermining the illusion of authenticity she seeks to create. Even more surprising, though, is how little this self-reflexive moment disturbs the reader, who is briefly directed to attend to the fictional status of the story and then directed back to the unfolding scene. In a similar way, critical readers of Jane Eyre might devote their attention to interpreting the allegorical significance of Jane’s journey, to identifying the generic conventions that Charlotte Brontë employs, to evaluating the accuracy of the novel’s representation of Victorian governesses, or to exposing the ideological commitments that the narrative upholds, but later return to the act of constructing the situation model of any given scene with undiminished responsiveness to the story. Because it is always possible to redirect one’s attention to the text as a set of cues about the fictional world, those who read the same novel again and again can still respond to the unfolding narrative with surprise and delight despite knowing the outcome of the story in advance.

Once we move beyond the ontological question of whether realist writers seek to deceive their readers, we can become attuned to the profoundly epistemological nature of their artistic project. The techniques of nineteenth-century novelists serve not to persuade readers to believe that the characters and incidents they depict are real, but to render nonexistent persons and events intimately knowable in spite of their fictional status. When we approach the novel in terms of this technical aim, its stylistic commitment to formal realism acquires fresh significance. Franco Moretti argues that, beginning with Jane Austen, the “countless minute events” of everyday life, in which characters “talk, play cards, visit, take walks, read a letter, listen to music, drink a cup of tea,” began to shift from the background to the foreground of narration, while Fredric Jameson alerts us to realism’s ambition, since the mid-nineteenth century, to capture the affective qualities of a scenic “present” in addition to relating the tale of an individual destiny. The novel’s attentiveness to the lives of ordinary individuals has been understood in relation to a matrix of historical and cultural developments: the shift in values from abstract, neoclassical ideals to the concrete realm of philosophic empiricism, the rise of a mass reading public and the democratization of literary attention, the increasing stability and regularity of bourgeois life, and a consumer economy that cultivated imaginative interest in everyday things. My aim is not to introduce a new reason for the ascendancy of formal realism, but to explore the phenomenological effects of this representational style.

This style, Ian Watt observes, is one that positions readers as if they were members of a jury who want to know “all the particulars” of a case, and requires the novelist to “bring his object home to us in all its concrete particularity.” If novels cater to a taste for the empirical experience of coming to know something by means of one’s own senses, they are defined by the pursuit of a specific representational goal. Novelists seek not merely to tell a story about specific characters and events, but also to transform the words on the page into a means by which readers can come to know, with a heightened degree of vividness, the felt experience of life within the fictional world. The epistemological work that realist novels perform has been variously understood as the process of capturing large-scale historical forces, puncturing illusory ideals, exposing the artifice of literary conventions, revealing the complexity of human interiority, and illuminating social conditions in need of reform. Yet even as nineteenth-century narratives bring these truths to light, the process of comprehending them also requires readers to undertake the epistemological project of constructing intricate mental representations of the fictional world itself. José Ortega y Gasset insists on this project’s centrality to realist aesthetics when he argues that the most lasting
pleasure novels provide lies not in finding out what happens in the plot, but rather in “being admitted” to the inner lives of fictional persons, “understanding them, and living immersed in their world.”

The question of how novelists can provide readers with a “more immediate” sense of fictional persons and places brings forward a dimension of literary language that tends to be taken for granted. In “The Reality Effect,” Roland Barthes argues that because the circumstantial details mentioned in a story do not refer to actual objects in the physical world, they merely signify that the text operates within the discursive convention of “realism.” What this account leaves out, however, is that comprehending a narrative necessarily involves constructing a mental representation of what the text describes regardless of whether a real referent is present. Indeed, even readers who have been instructed to attend only to the formal features of a text cannot help coming away with some sense of its semantic content. As frequently as twentieth-century theorists have tried to pull the rug out from under the word rug, a practical obstacle stands in the way: our multisensory knowledge of what kind of thing a rug is comes too readily to mind. When we recognize the ease with which words activate a reader’s knowledge even in the absence of an actual referent, nineteenth-century novelists can no longer be said to be as naive about how language works as they have sometimes been made out to be.

A growing area of study in cognitive psychology focuses on how mental processes are grounded in perception and action. According to cognitive theories of the embodied mind, features of our empirical experiences become encoded in memory as multimodal “traces” of the original experiences themselves, and these experiential traces can subsequently be retrieved and combined to form new mental representations. After words become linked to these traces through repeated association (as when young children are repeatedly prompted to say the name of an object aloud), they can serve as cues that activate experiential traces in the minds of readers and listeners. This embodied view of the relationship between language, perception, and action reestablishes the importance of Ferdinand de Saussure’s assertion in 1916 that words cannot be separated from the concepts they bring to mind:

A language might also be compared to a sheet of paper. Thought is one side of the sheet and sound the reverse side. Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought, or thought from sound.

In contrast to later interpretations of his claims, Saussure is careful to stress that, even though the connection between the sound “père” and the concept of father is a matter of arbitrary convention, words and concepts are not separable from one another in practice. (Within this linguistic and psychological context, concepts refer not exclusively to abstractions like truth and equality, but also to our knowledge of different categories of things in the world, from cats and cakes to chairs and children.)

The practical role that embodied knowledge plays in reading comprehension complicates another familiar claim about how literary language works. Viktor Shklovsky argues that art exists “to increase the difficulty and length of perception,” to recover “the sensation of things as they are perceived,” to “make the stone stony.” Lamenting the inevitable process by which we become so habituated to our environment that we move blindly and unconsciously through life, Shklovsky credits literary language with the unique capacity to free us from the automatization of quotidian existence. Yet even as verbal artists seek to reawaken us to the stoniness of the stone, alerting us to whether it is flat or round, smooth or sandpaper, hefty or surprisingly light, they ultimately cannot bring us into contact with the thing itself. Because the stone remains absent and, indeed, nonexistent, verbal artists can make us “feel things” only if there is some intimate, preexisting connection between their verbal medium and our senses. Even as Shklovsky accentuates the dangers of automaticity, the capacity for literary language to defamiliarize things nonetheless depends on the extremely rapid, automatic capacity for words to activate a reader’s experiential traces.

A writer’s dependence on the reader’s ability to retrieve her own embodied knowledge exposes an underrecognized relationship between labor and realist representation. Faced with the “impossibility of really reproducing” in words everything that is in a fictional world, novelists strategically select verbal cues that are maximally effective at activating their readers’ existing experiential traces. Readers assist with the writer’s attempt to evoke fictional persons and places by drawing upon their own rich store of background knowledge, which they have in turn acquired from their everyday labor of perceiving and moving through the physical world. Novelists bring their object “home to us in all its concrete particularity” in part by selecting details that are literally close to home. When George Eliot declares her intention to represent humble persons, such as “an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner,” it is no coincidence that she invites readers to conceive of routine physical actions (bending, eating) that are so ready to hand. Whereas Fredric Jameson argues that nineteenth-century novels program the reading body into “forming new habits of perception,” the process by which readers construct mental representations of fictional persons and scenes depends on an inverse relationship between embodied knowledge and comprehension. It is not so much that novels are a training ground where readers practice forms of perception they will apply in everyday life. Rather, the knowledge they have acquired and the skills they have honed
from the cumulative labor of everyday experience make it possible for readers to grasp, in an almost palpable way, the perceptual features of scenes that are totally absent from the senses.

As part of the process of building durable mental representations of fictional worlds, readers draw upon their embodied knowledge to comprehend sensory phenomena; they use their social intelligence to interpret the behavior of fictional persons; and they repeatedly retrieve and revise mental models of persons and places just as they do on a daily basis. But while many of the mental operations that realist writers seek to engage are continuous with those that readers rely upon in extraliterary experience, the activity of novel reading is distinctive precisely because of the fictional status of the persons and incidents the text represents. In contrast to perceiving, judging, and acting in our actual lives, in which there is something really at stake for ourselves, realist fiction permits us to achieve the seemingly impossible with surprising ease. Mundane physical experiences that readers regularly undergo without a second thought become a means by which they can come to know, in deep and durable ways, a vibrant, expansive world that has no real existence. This small miracle is a major source of the surprise and delight that novels uniquely afford.

Recognizing literary realism's reliance on a reader's existing knowledge and abilities opens up a new way to interpret the sentiment, expressed by readers from the nineteenth century to the present, that novels “feel real” or “seem lifelike.” These statements have often been dismissed as naïve expressions of ontological confusion or faulty assessments of a text's historical accuracy. But far from being a judgment about a novel's fidelity to reality, the claim that a fictional world feels real can be understood quite differently: as an evaluative judgment prompted by the felt experience of comprehension itself. What can be sufficient for Lady Catherine de Bourgh to seem lifelike and for Pemberley to feel real is for readers to feel as if they are able to think about them as easily as they think about actual persons and places. This subjective assessment can reflect a range of phenomenological effects, such as the immediacy with which readers seem to grasp the sensory properties of a represented scene; the proficiency with which they observe, comprehend, and recall a character's behavior; the intensity with which they feel indignation, anxiety, or delight in response to narrative events; or the depth of their attentional absorption in the reading process. Not only do these effects depend on a reader's own abilities and inclinations, but they can also be significantly diminished or amplified by the representational techniques that novelists employ.

To understand a novel's reality effects as a function of how well the text takes advantage of a reader's cognitive capacities is to approach literary representation in a surprisingly Aristotelian way. Or, rather, the cognitive process of comprehending a work of art has all along been fundamental to Aristotle's account of mimesis. In the Poetics, Aristotle grounds the pleasure of mimetic art in the audience's cognitive experience of coming to recognize and understand what is being represented. Although his discussion of verisimilitude in drama focuses on whether the sequence of action in a play satisfies an audience's conventional sense of probability and necessity, Aristotle's remarks on mimesis in painting and music highlight the broader capacity for represented forms and patterns to elicit cognitive and affective responses that are closely aligned with our responses to actual objects, persons, and events. Stephen Halliwell notes, however, that for Aristotle, "the full cognitive experience of a mimetic work encompasses, and is modified by, the fact that the object is not real but a product of artistic construction." In other words, even as nineteenth-century novels engage their readers' extraliterary knowledge and abilities, a reader's experience of coming to know the represented fictional world is profoundly mediated—mediated by the reading process, by the novelist's verbal medium, and by the tautological way in which mimesis is "always a world of not-quite."

The realist writer's ambition to convey the felt experience of vibrant fictional worlds remains relatively undereexplored despite the formal and aesthetic significance of this technical aim. This is due in part to the many ways in which realism, as a specific artistic movement that emerged in mid-nineteenth-century France and Britain, demands to be understood as a historical and ethical project distinct from and even defined against the mere pursuit of verisimilitude. John Ruskin, for example, dismissed mimetic illusion as a clever trick that threatens to distract us from realism's more important efforts to capture truth. Yet because readers and critics alike possess the mental agility to shift their attention from one aspect of realist representation to another, exploring the dynamic relation between literary technique and the reading process does not foreclose attention to the other aims that nineteenth-century writers more explicitly emphasized. Although Ruskin considered "our recognition of the making of the artwork" to be "the first and least interesting moment of the story," many novel readers and even some literary critics have persisted in acknowledging a fictional work's "ability to create a sense of three-dimensional, detailed, sensory experience of a world that has a feeling of reality to it." By taking these reader responses seriously as evidence of the effects that realist writers are able to achieve, we can begin to recover how much nineteenth-century novelists have to tell us about the mechanics of mimetic representation.

From Homer's Odyssey to Joyce's Ulysses, the pursuit of verisimilar effects can be found all across literary history. Yet nineteenth-century novelists have been credited with developing an array of representational techniques that have come to define our sense of what fiction is. In the chapters that follow, I reveal how
specific techniques in realist fiction can shape a reader’s process of forming impressions of fictional persons, incidents, and experiences. This more intricate view of the relationship between literary representation and the reading mind in turn complicates our picture of how novels influence their readers, alerting us to the underrecognized way in which the reading process exerts pressure on novelistic technique. In 1921, Roman Jakobson pointed out that critical assessments of whether a work of art seems “realistic” merely reflect expectations established by artworks themselves. But even as our judgments about whether a novel can be labeled “realistic” depend on whether we find what we have been conditioned to look for, techniques that seem highly conventional can also happen to engage, with astonishing effectiveness, a variety of mental operations that readers regularly rely on to make sense of persons and events in everyday life. Just as the physical size and shape of a book are not only determined by cultural and economic forces but also reflect the parameters of the reading body, so the craft of fiction is not only a function of artistic convention but also exists in relation to the capacities, limitations, and inclinations of the reading mind.

**A Different Approach to Realism**

All novelists are not alike. Every novelist understands her task in her own way. Certain writers alert us to representational effects that others permit us to ignore. My starting point is a writer whose work most fully expresses realism’s ambition to evoke the immediate sensory and affective properties of an implied fictional world. In *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy displays a singular commitment to enabling readers to grasp the felt experience of everyday life. Because the reader’s embodied condition is so central to Tolstoy’s technique, his work foregrounds a dimension of novelistic representation that often plays a secondary role in the work of other realist writers. Namely, Tolstoy’s artistic project presents a striking alternative to that of Honoré de Balzac, the novelist whose aims and methods have had an outsized influence on theoretical claims about what nineteenth-century realism is and how it works. Take, for example, the passage from *Le Père Goriot* that Erich Auerbach singles out in *Mimesis*. Here Balzac’s narrator explicitly instructs readers on how to interpret the descriptive details he provides, indicating that Madame Vauquer’s “whole person” must be understood as “an explicit comment on the boarding house, just as the boarding house is implicitly suggestive of her.”

The pallid corpulence of this dumpy woman is the product of this sort of life, as typhus is caused by the effluvia of a hospital. Her knitted woollen petticoat, showing below the overskirt made from an old dress, with the padding coming out through splits in the worn material, sums up the drawing-room, the dining-room, the garden, gives an idea of the food and some inkling of the boarders.

This passage invites us to appreciate the metonymic coherence between a character and her surroundings, and to recognize that both are symptomatic of an overall historical condition. These metonymic relationships have become fundamental to how critics think about many literary texts, but the fact that Balzac feels the need to be explicit about how he wants to be read reminds us of the specificity of his novelist project.

In contrast to Balzac, for whom even what seems like “a physical sensation—a musty smell, a rancid taste, a greasy fabric”—exists in order to perform an allegorical function, Tolstoy is invested in a notably different epistemological goal. For him, readers should strive to comprehend the sensations and emotions represented in the text as fully as possible as an aesthetic and ethical end in itself. Critics have noted that, in *Anna Karenina*, the sensory features described are “so vividly present—the creak of growing grass, the exhilaration of the hunt”—that they seem “free from symbol.” In an especially glaring violation of narrative logic, the timeline of the Anna and Vronsky plot is out of sync with the Kitty and Levin plot by an entire year, while Dolly’s story lags behind even more. Tolstoy’s inattentiveness to the novel’s large-scale architecture underscores the extent of his aesthetic commitment to a much smaller scale of time. The author himself asserted, “True life begins where there take place infinitely small alterations which seem to us, tiny, tiny. True life does not take place where large, external alterations are accomplished, where people move about, clash, fight, and kill each other; it takes place only where tiny, tiny, infinitesimally small alterations are accomplished.” For him, individual destiny plays out at the scale of everyday incidents. But while Tolstoy locates moral action in the “infinitesimally small” incidents of everyday life, his aim in representing these moments is not merely didactic. By engaging the motor knowledge readers have acquired from their own embodied experience, Tolstoy evokes a fictional world that seems almost palpably real.

My first chapter recovers the phenomenological and ideological significance of Tolstoy’s attentiveness to everyday physical actions in *Anna Karenina*. At the same time that novelists engage our existing embodied knowledge to produce impressions of sensory immediacy, however, they also enlist our social intelligence to create fictional characters who can seem to live on in the minds of readers even after the story itself has faded. While we tend to assume that this capacity for lifelikeness depends on a character’s psychological complexity, Jane
Austen's reception history is distinguished by claims that even minor characters like Mr. Collins seem as lifelike as actual friends and neighbors. Chapter 2 demonstrates how *Pride and Prejudice* enables readers to form uncommonly durable impressions of its characters. By focusing on the cumulative effects of impression formation, this chapter also accounts for how Austen's notoriously indirect style of narration has led so many readers to feel as if they share a private rapport with the author herself.

Austen and Tolstoy display distinct techniques by which writers on both ends of the great tradition of European realism seem to overcome the limits of their artistic medium by engaging their readers' knowledge and abilities. Yet even as realist writers cue readers to think about fictional characters and incidents in the same way that they think about persons and events in real life, the phenomenology of reading fiction is defined by its discontinuities from firsthand sensory and social experience. To show how these discontinuities shape realist aesthetics, I turn to Victorian writers who amplify the mediated nature of literary representation. For example, the scale of Charles Dickens's realist project makes it impossible to ignore the difference between reading and seeing, as when the long lists of concrete items he often presents give rise to mental representations that are notably indistinct. Chapter 3 demonstrates how certain arrangements of narrative information in *Bleak House* render concrete particulars more difficult for readers to remember, alerting us to the overlooked relationship between the conventions of formal realism and the comprehension process.

Whereas Dickens exposes the constraints upon a novel reader's capacity to take in narrative information, George Eliot's intrusive narrators insist that even the most distinct mental representations fall short of what it would be like to apprehend the fictional world firsthand. Chapter 4 relies on Eliot's self-consciousness about the limits of her medium, along with the proto-Romantic aesthetics of Edmund Burke, to reveal how realist novels can enchant ordinary objects and experiences simply by mediating the reader's relation to them. If the fictional objects we attend to in a novel are absent and out of reach, however, the form of companionship provided by literary characters is uniquely delimited as well. In chapter 5, I specify what readers lose when the conclusion of a novel brings these one-sided attachments to an end. Here I enlist Thomas Hardy's elegiac poetry to lay bare the surprising liberty of attending to persons who dwell in one's mind but exist nowhere in the actual world.

Across the chapters of this book, I model a new form of critical attention, approaching the words of a literary text not as bearers of interpretive meaning but as cues that prompt readers to retrieve their existing embodied knowledge, to rely on their social intelligence, and to exercise their capacities for learning. By attending to how different nineteenth-century novels shape a reader's process of coming to know the objects they represent, we can begin to specify what is singular about the phenomenological effects they create—to put our finger on the paradoxical way in which novels can bring readers into relation with fictional persons and worlds that seem at once palpably real and forever out of reach, intimately familiar and ultimately indeterminate, nonexistent and impossible to forget.
NOTES

Introduction

16. For literary critical approaches to Theory of Mind, see Lisa Zamirine, Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006); Alan Palmer, Social Minds in the Novel (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010); and Blakey Vermeule, Why Do We Care about Literary Characters? (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).


23. The term surface code does not carry an implicit judgment about the linguistic features; it reflects how rapidly readers tend to forget the exact words of a narrative.


27. For a model of this approach, see Andrew Elfenbein, The Gist of Reading (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).


32. [Virginia Woolf], "Jane Austen," Times Literary Supplement, 8 May 1913, 190.


42. Reeves and Nass, Media Equation, 12.


46. For more on this phenomenon, see chapter 5.


54. Watt, Rise of the Novel, 32.


71. Ibid.


76. For more on comprehending the experiences of fictional persons, see Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012); for more on readerly anxiety and indignation, see Flesch’s *Consequences*; for more on immersion, see Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).


81. Ibid., 59; Adela Pinch, “Reality Sensing in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Or, Half-Mended Stockings” (paper, Modern Language Association Convention, Chicago, 9 January 2014).


Chapter 1


7. Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 5.


11. Donna Tussing Orwin notes that, because Tolstoy believed “in the necessity of grounding all knowledge in personal experience,” he adopted a style of representation that appealed to the reader’s own sense perceptions and memories.” *Introduction: Tolstoy as Artist and Public Figure,* in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. Donna Tussing Orwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 54.


