
H-France Review Vol. 21 (October 2021), No. 196

Maria C. Scott, *Empathy and the Strangeness of Fiction: Readings in French Realism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 235 pp. \$105.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1474463034.

Review by Anne O'Neil-Henry, Georgetown University.

“Allons! encore notre vieux carrick”: From the first line of Balzac’s *Le Colonel Chabert*, the protagonist, a formerly ranked official in Napoleon’s army, is marked as an outsider—to his former marriage, to Parisian society of the *Restauration*, and, as this opening quote evinces, to the realm of living human beings. “One of fiction’s classic strangers” (p. 44), Chabert grapples with the complications of having been declared dead while still being alive and confronts the impossibility of returning to his previous life, social status, and relationships after the fall of Napoleon. Throughout the novel, he elicits a range of responses from the other characters: derision from the employees who work in the law office of Derville; aversion and concern from his former wife, la Comtesse Ferraud, who worries that his return will end her already fragile second marriage; curiosity and, ultimately, sympathy from Derville, who facilitates negotiations between the former spouses. Derville marvels and laments in the novel’s conclusion about the incredible destiny of Chabert: “Sorti de l’hospice des *Enfants trouvés*, il revient mourir à l’hospice de la *Vieillesse*, après avoir, dans l’intervalle, aidé Napoléon à conquérir l’Égypte et l’Europe.”[1] And through the portrayal of this character and others, the reader also feels pity for Chabert and contempt for the contemporary Parisian scene. Balzac’s representation of Chabert offers a lens through which to read and critique *Restauration* society as well as a lesson in understanding extraordinary characters who hold in tension oppositional traits: dead, living; pitiful, grand; marginal, significant. As Scott argues in her incisive new book, *Empathy and the Strangeness of Fiction: Readings in French Realism*, such strangers, especially those who are closely associated with fiction, can help illuminate how the novels in which they feature teach readers about literature’s impact on human empathy. Alongside studies in psychology that aim to quantify literature’s impact on readers’ empathy, Scott uses readings of three nineteenth-century French realist novels to examine what these texts themselves can elucidate about literature’s possible social function.

Scott’s book is composed of three short introductory chapters that lay the theoretical and methodological groundwork for three longer chapters, each of which offers a close reading of a different novel. There is a chapter on Balzac’s *La fille aux yeux d’or* (1835), one on Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830), and one on Sand’s *Indiana* (1832). Each of these literary analyses convincingly illustrates Scott’s argument and would also be valuable on their own as illuminating readings of the individual novels.

In the first chapter of the book—"Does Reading Fiction Boost Empathy?"—Scott offers an extensive overview of psychological studies that have examined whether exposure to fiction can impact the empathy of the human beings reading it. As she outlines it, such studies have indeed demonstrated links between one's emotional involvement in reading fiction and increased levels of empathy. Yet the concept of empathy itself can have different meanings, and Scott explains that, while there is no clear consensus in the field of psychology on the definition of this term, it is generally "understood to involve at least the illusion of sharing, on the part of a self, in the affective experience of another, a foreign consciousness" (p. 4). Scott goes further to distinguish the related but distinct concepts of affective sharing and "mind-reading" that are at the heart of empathy—a key distinction she employs throughout her study—and to lay the ground for her book's main argument: that fiction both "exercises, and even potentially builds, mind-reading skills," but that it also "crucially highlights the limits of our ability to know other people" (p. 9) and that "close readings of narrative fictions can complement psychological approaches to the question of how fiction-reading engages empathy" (p. 12). This first introductory chapter helps the author situate her study in the field of literary studies, but it also serves as a serious engagement with research in psychology and sets up the interdisciplinary method that subtends the book.

Next, in a second introductory chapter, Scott looks at literary studies that have analyzed the role of empathy in fiction. Alongside the psychological studies on empathy and fiction with which she engages in the previous chapter, Scott chooses to approach her study through examples of fiction itself, maintaining that "fiction is the most reliable source of knowledge about the dynamics of its own reception" (p. 24). She is interested, in other words, in what the books themselves can tell us about the interplay between empathy and fiction. Returning to some of the key concepts from the psychological works she examines, Scott highlights the notions of seduction and suspicion (or affective sharing and mind-reading), and the way these elements of empathy are deployed in fiction. This leads her to a third and final introductory chapter on the role of strangers in fiction. It is her contention that "fictional dramatisations of encounters with fiction-associated strangers can tell us something important about encounters with narrative fiction" (p. 34). By positioning her definition of what it means to be a stranger in fiction—characters marked as different from others or as having "outsider status"—Scott clarifies her book's main argument: that representations of strangers in literature can inform readers of the links between empathy and fiction since they can be said to serve as "indirect representations with fiction" (p. 47) and that "the fictional strangers, and by extension the fictional stories themselves elicit a combination of suspicion and fascination, the narratives in which they feature highlighting both the dangers of affective sharing and the limits of mind-reading in the encounter with narrative fiction" (p. 54). Finally, the author justifies her choice of Balzac, Flaubert, and Sand's works. These are novels from the 1830s, "when the outsider character was an established Romantic trope," that "define themselves against Romanticism, despite containing Romantic elements themselves, and [that] would eventually be recognized as early examples of French literary realism" (p. 56). At the end of these introductory chapters, the reader is armed with a theoretical and methodological apparatus with which to approach the book's three case studies.

Through analysis of *La fille aux yeux d'or*'s main characters—Henri de Marsay and Paquita Valdès—Scott builds on the work of cognitive literary scholars to show in the fourth chapter of her book how the text "appeals to the reader's desire to find out the text's secret, but also frustrates that desire" (p. 68). Scott first demonstrates how Henri and Paquita are classified repeatedly as strangers—in the sense that they are of foreign origin and both characterized as

elusive, even mysterious. In addition, the narrator, Scott explains, repeatedly describes both characters as well as their relationship with one another using language related to the imagination or fiction. What then, she asks, can these two strangers associated with fiction who can be seen as “proxies for the fictional story in which they feature” tell us about how to read the novel (p. 72)? On the one hand, Henri’s ability to comprehend others mirrors that of the omniscient Balzacian narrator, and he initially classifies Paquita as a knowable type, despite the fact that she is unknown to him. His desire to know her is driven by a desire to possess her, but he is not able to fully achieve what he wants. However, both characters finally remain impenetrable to a certain degree—to readers, to one another, and especially in the case of Paquita, to herself. For Scott, Henri’s attempts to find out Paquita’s secret reveal the ethical limitations of mind-reading: “to wish to know the secret desires of the other is to wish to appropriate and even suppress the other” (p. 92). What stands out, ultimately, is a resistance to the readability or understanding of the two characters; the text instructs the reader that she “needs to learn to tolerate not knowing, not fully comprehending” (p. 92). Through these two “highly seductive characters” and the periods of separation that punctuate their encounters, Scott maintains, the novel invites the readers to “enter into a relationship of attachment and detachment with both of its two principal strangers” (p. 95). This suggests that the reader both accept Henri’s actions without judgement and adopt a critical distance from the character and, similarly, that the reader feel an emotional attachment with Paquita, that, Scott points out, could lead to a critical perspective on Henri. In other words, the tension between “affective attachment and critical judgement”—a complicated pull between critical and naïve reader responses—offers insight into the approach the novel itself suggests for how to read it (p. 97). The reader is “tacitly warned to avoid succumbing to a seduction or narrative empathy that would erase boundaries between reader and characters, and advised to maintain, or at least return to, a critical distance from the emotional content of the novel” (p. 100).

Scott next sets her sights on Stendhal to examine what the responses to Julien Sorel, a “striking figure of the stranger” (p. 109) regularly associated with fiction, can illuminate about *Le Rouge et le noir*’s recommended reading practices. Through attentive analysis, the author maps out how Sorel is marked as a stranger throughout the novel: as a stranger in his own family, as an outsider in the situations in which he finds himself, as other than he seems, and, more generally, as “unreadable to both himself and the reader” (p. 110). Moreover, he is also a character, as Scott puts it, “closely associated with narrative invention throughout the text” (p. 115). He is an ideal figure, therefore, to test out her theory that such characters expose the novel’s own ideas about reading. Moving on to an examination of the concept of mind-reading in *Le Rouge et le noir*, Scott deftly demonstrates how reading others carefully gives characters both the power to defend themselves “successfully against other people’s attempted readings” and also “the related power to mislead others” (p. 116). A lack of this ability disadvantages characters, notably Monsieur de Rênal. However, while Julien can be inscrutable to the novel’s characters, as Scott points out, “his secret intentions and motivations are regularly revealed to readers” (p. 119) which can result in interpretive difficulties—is he “hypocritical or sincere...prudent or imprudent...cynical or naïve” (p. 119)? Through an analysis of Mme de Rênal and Mathilde’s understandings of the inscrutable Julien, Scott demonstrates how “they may help us to understand how the text unconsciously programmes its own reading” (p. 120). Mme de Rênal, she argues, develops as a reader of other characters’ minds over the course of the novel; Mathilde’s mind-reading abilities are sharp and though there may be some examples of deficiencies in this ability throughout the novel, she is nonetheless aware “of the limits of her own understanding of Julien” (p. 130), critical on the one hand but also emotionally attached and thus capable of “straddling two opposed attitudes” (p.

134). This leads Scott to conclude on a persuasive note: that these two women's methods of "reading" Julien reflect the "difficult combination of seduction and suspicion, affective sharing and mind-reading...tacitly advocated by *Le Rouge et le noir*" (p. 142).

Scott's final case study is George Sand's *Indiana* and, in particular, the representations of two further "fiction-connoted figures of the stranger," Raymon de Ramière and Ralph. Using these characters, she shows what the novel has to say about mind reading skills and affective sharing. Scott carefully takes her reader through the different ways that both Raymon and Ralph are associated with fiction. The former is characterized as duplicitous to the point that "the reader may find Raymon difficult to read...partly because she is encouraged to feel with, or empathise with, him" (p. 161) but at the same time heightens "readers' suspicion of him" (p. 163). Ralph is also a contradictory figure who appears to undergo a rather radical transformation: from "a slightly odd insider...to a heroic outsider, from a passionless secondary character to a passionate protagonist, and from a figure strongly associated with prosaic reality to a figure invested with all the charms and seductions of fiction" (p. 170). Both characters, in other words, test the mind-reading abilities of the protagonist Indiana, of the narrator, and of the readers themselves. Ultimately, Scott demonstrates, "the novel problematizes any fixed hierarchical opposition between naïve and critical reading practices, suggesting that a combination of openness to seduction and suspicion militates against the potential dangers of the former and the potential odiousness of the latter" (p. 197). Like the two previous ones, this chapter offers a new reading of a well-known novel, and convincingly supports the broader argument that literary works themselves must be privileged when taking into consideration literature's social impact.

A short conclusion brings to a close this thoroughly researched, well written, and genuinely interesting study that offers a fresh perspective on three canonical works of nineteenth-century French literature and showcases the key role of literary works themselves in the question of fiction's influence on empathy. Scott's book ably shows how literature can both draw in its readers and teach them how to read critically, to be open to others, but also to acknowledge and accept unknowability. The book's interdisciplinary approach will be of interest to scholars of nineteenth-century French studies, as well as to literary scholars more broadly. In guiding its readers through the narrative tensions and complex characters in the three novels it studies, and in placing those readings alongside psychological studies and literary criticism, Scott's book provides a model for further studies on literature and empathy.

NOTE

[1] Honoré de Balzac, *Le Colonel Chabert* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 165.

Anne O'Neil-Henry
Georgetown University
ao358@georgetown.edu

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ISSN 1553-9172