



Experiencing Experiences with Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper defends the idea that literary works can be vehicles of what has been called experiential knowledge; that is, literary works can offer knowledge of what it is like to have a particular kind of experience. After reviewing some of the critiques this epistemological conception of literature has recently received, I offer a reading of one of its earliest formulations, found in Dorothy Walsh's book *Literature and Knowledge* (1969), which I believe is still relevant to contemporary discussions on the topic. By combining some key insights from Walsh's account with John Dewey's understanding of experience as a form of undergoing, I argue that literary works can give a sense or a feel of what it is like to experience something, while acknowledging that there are also some important differences between literary and real-world experiences. I illuminate my own understanding of experiential knowledge by analysing the account of the experience of social death in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). I am especially interested in identifying the stylistic and literary techniques behind the experiential knowledge I believe the novel offers. The paper ends by providing a closer examination of the character of the literary experience underpinning experiential knowledge and by putting forth reasons why experiential knowledge should be considered a serious epistemic notion.

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Experiential knowledge has been a highly popular concept for explaining the cognitive value of literature in aesthetics. It has received various formulations and it has been defended from a variety of theoretical vantage points. Proponents of the idea nevertheless share the view that literature can give knowledge of what it is like to experience experiences. It is claimed that there are two sides to our experience – what we experience and how we experience something – and literature is claimed to be an effective medium for illuminating the latter, which is considered an elusive aspect of our lives.¹

The issue is very much alive, with research both defending and criticizing the idea still appearing. Critics have raised scepticism towards the idea, for example by pointing to the differences between literary experiences and real-world experiences. How can literature be assumed to give knowledge of what it is like to experience something, given the almost self-evident differences between the two kinds of experience? For example, real fear is in many ways a very different kind of experience from experiencing a literary portrayal of fear.²

Some have also felt that supporters of the idea of experiential knowledge overstate their claim, when insisting that, because experiential knowledge involves a connection to the qualitative aspects of experience, it is essentially a form of nonpropositional knowledge that cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge of the form X is Y and that can be acquired only by having a certain kind of experience. This criticism maintains that what some philosophers have called experiential knowledge might, on closer scrutiny, turn out to be simply a highly thick propositional description of an experience, which gives the reader a false impression of having reached a qualitative understanding of what a given depicted experience is like. What seems like nonpropositional experiential knowledge might, in the end, just turn out to be very detailed propositional knowledge about an experience.³

In this paper, I develop the idea of experiential knowledge further, as well as respond to some of the criticisms it has received. My basic claim is that the cognitive content of literary works can go beyond even highly detailed descriptions of experiences,

1 For defences of the idea of experiential knowledge, see, for example, David Novitz, *Knowledge, Fiction, and Imagination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 120–27; Gregory Currie, 'The Moral Psychology of Fiction', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1995): 250–59; Eileen John, 'Art and Knowledge', in *The Routledge Handbook of Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2005), 421–23; Scott Stroud, 'Simulation, Subjective Knowledge, and the Cognitive Value of Literary Narrative', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42 (2008): 19–41; Alice Denham, 'Ethical Estrangement: Pictures, Poetry, and Epistemic Value', in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 183–204; László Kajtár, 'What Mary Didn't Read: On Literary Narratives and Knowledge', *Ratio* 29 (2016): 327–43; Rafe McGregor, 'Narrative Representation and Phenomenological Knowledge', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94 (2016): 327–42; Kalle Puolakka, 'Learning from Literary Experience', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 56 (2022): 56–73; Antony Aumann, 'Art, Imagination, and Experiential Knowledge', *Synthese* 201, no. 100 (2023). Not all these authors use the concept of experiential knowledge, but they nevertheless share a common research target, namely to analyse the ways in which literature can give knowledge of what experiences are like. Novitz, for example, calls this type of knowledge 'emphatic knowledge' and McGregor 'phenomenological knowledge'.

2 Maureen Donnelly, 'The Cognitive Value of Literary Perspectives', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77 (2019): 11–22.

3 Gregory Currie, *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 102–3.

providing the reader with a feel of the depicted experiences, and that some evident differences between literary and real-world experiences do not undercut literary works' capacity to serve as a source of such knowledge. From this perspective, the cognitive content of literature is not solely in the descriptions of experiences but sometimes also in the actual experiences they engender in readers. I do not, however, claim that literary works can give the reader the same exact experience as depicted in a literary work. Rather, they can give the reader a phenomenological sense or a feel of the depicted experiences. Even though this formulation is more modest than some conceptions of experiential knowledge, I believe it nevertheless manages to maintain the spirit of the idea.

To develop my view, I revisit one of the earliest accounts of experiential knowledge found in Dorothy Walsh's book *Literature and Knowledge* (1969), which has received regrettably little attention in recent discussion. Walsh draws on John Dewey's views on experience, which also have a key position in the understanding of experiential knowledge that I develop in the paper. I will, however, focus on slightly different parts of Dewey's philosophy than she did – namely, on Dewey's conception of experience as a form of undergoing that will serve as a kind of bridge between Walsh's theory and my own account. A reading of a concrete literary case, the depiction of the consequences of slavery in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), will have an important role in my view. With this example, I illuminate the literary means, which I believe explain literary work's capacity to provide knowledge about the feel of experiences. This examination shows that, even though the epistemic core of experiential knowledge lies in the actual experiences of the reader, it is grounded in demonstrable and analysable features of literary works. It should, therefore, be likened to a relational rather than a relativistic component of literary works that would alter randomly from reader to reader.⁴ In the final parts of the paper, I investigate two issues – the character of the literary experience behind experiential knowledge and the epistemic foundations of experiential knowledge – which I hope strengthens the claim that, despite its evident subjectivity, experiential knowledge is a valid epistemic notion and that literary works can serve as potential sources of it.

II. REALIZING AN EXPERIENCE

Even though in her account of the cognitive value of literature Walsh does not systematically use the notion of experiential knowledge, she has often been considered an important forerunner of the idea. She joins a host of philosophers of literature in arguing that a proper understanding of the cognitive value of literature requires an epistemology that utilizes a broader notion of knowledge than the standard X is Y type of propositional knowledge.⁵ Knowledge, in Walsh's case, is likened to something that is acquired through having or living through something, such as a particular kind of disease, having an especially deceitful friend, or some other life happening. The epistemic force of such experiences is shown, for example, by the fact that we can often justifiably trust the views of somebody because of the experiences they have had.⁶

4 On the difference between relativism and relationality in explanations of the cognitive value of literature, see Jukka Mikkonen, *Philosophy, Literature, and Understanding: On Reading and Cognition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 115–16.

5 See, for example, John, 'Art and Knowledge', 428.

6 Dorothy Walsh, *Literature and Knowledge* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 10–11.

Being more complex and enduring than basic sense-perceptions, the nature of these types of experiences is not exhausted by identifying the content of the experience. Such experiences are often experienced in a particular mode; along with ‘what’, there is also a ‘how’ aspect to them. For this reason, acquiring knowledge about such experiences is more a matter of ‘living through’ than grasping the content of some set of propositions.⁷

In Walsh’s account, experiential knowledge primarily concerns experiences that she denotes with the term *an* experience. The concept derives from Dewey, who, following William James, equates our lives with a kind of continuous and altering experiential stream. For Dewey, *an* experiences mark experiences that stand out from the general experiential stream of our lives, something he often emphasizes by italicizing the non-definite article of the concept. Walsh articulates this idea by claiming that in *an* experience our awareness is reduplicated. In other words, *an* experiences are a matter of not just awareness but ‘awareness of awareness’. *An* experiences denote multi-layered ways of experiencing and a particular experiential feel is often an ineliminable part of them. This feel can, moreover, undergo changes during the experience, for example from grief to sublime nostalgia, as might be the case with the experience of the death of a loved one or of an exemplary figure of one’s life. When having *an* experiences, we are conscious that we are experiencing something as something, which gives the experience a more dynamic and enduring structure compared to idle, passing experiences. *An* experience is not just joy, for example, but joy about the coming of spring.⁸ Or, to use Walsh’s own example of the ways in which our awareness can reduplicate in the experience of suffering,

[t]here is a suffering self which, as suffering, is not in a state of satisfaction, but there can be a witnessing self who responds with satisfaction to the way the suffering self is enduring its suffering. In short, experiencing, in the sense of living through, is not to be identified with any simple situation of an awareness.⁹

Being aware of how one is experiencing something turns an experience into *an* experience in Walsh’s sense. For her, literature is a valuable epistemic medium precisely because it can, in her view, articulate different ways of experiencing. Literary works can, in other words, show different ways of how our awareness can reduplicate in *an* experiences. Experiences, such as suffering, can be experienced in different ways.¹⁰ In Walsh’s view, our everyday experience is often flickering in character, lacking in contours, and marked by interruptions, which emphasizes the significance of literature as a medium for gaining insight into *an* experiences. Apart from easy cases like being joyous about spring, in everyday life, experiences do not tend to present themselves as clearly articulated and easily conceivable wholes. The challenge is doubled when trying to gain insight into the experiences of other people, in which case we cannot rely on direct awareness of the experience but need to recourse on imaginative assimilation. All in all, Walsh argues that, in everyday life, we get only a glimpse of what she calls ‘the intelligibility’ of experiences.¹¹

7 Ibid., 99–100.

8 Ibid., 86–87, 90–91.

9 Ibid., 103.

10 Ibid., 69, 88.

11 Ibid., 66.

According to Walsh, the cognitive value of literature follows from their capacity to ‘incarnate experiences’. Literary works allow a completely different kind of setting than everyday life for exploring experiences. At their best, they filter away the contingencies of experiences and help the reader to see experiences freshly and more vividly. Also, in Walsh’s view, literary language, which evokes ‘the sensuous, the emotional, and the intellectual’ gives the possibility of grasping the qualitative aspects of experience, what she calls their ‘direct sensuous presence’.¹² In this regard, literary works *show* rather than say something about experiences. By incarnating experiences, a literary work can ‘provide us with the possibility of “fully seeing”’, as Walsh puts it.¹³ Walsh summarizes her position on the cognitive value of literature:

I propose [...] that literary art, when functioning successfully as literary art, provides knowledge in the form of realization: the realization of what anything might come to as a form of lived experience. [...] This is knowing by living through, and it is something distinguishably different from knowing about.¹⁴

Walsh’s idea of readers realizing experiences, which are incarnated in literary works, can be seen to echo Nelson Goodman’s famous idea of exemplification of the same period and I cannot help concluding this section with some Goodmanian reflections.¹⁵ Walsh does not refer to Goodman’s concept of exemplification, but the core of her view can be explicated with its help; it gives the Goodmanian idea of exemplification an experiential twist. Walsh, for example, ponders what it means to experience something falsely or in a pretentious manner. The response, in her view, could, indeed, be found in literature. The reader can realize this mode of experiencing by reading a literary work to which that type of *an* experience is successfully incarnated.¹⁶ In Goodman’s terminology, in such cases the reader’s experience exemplifies the real-world experience incarnated in the literary work. While Walsh’s idea of realization does not include a systematic account of the connection between literary experience and real-world experience, Goodman’s view gives the possibility of construing the relationship as a form of exemplification. This Goodmanian take on experiential knowledge also neatly captures the idea, to which I will return later, that a literary experience can give insight into a real-world experience even without a complete overlap between the two experiences. It is sufficient for cognitive value that the literary experience exemplifies the real-world experience.

III. FROM UNDERGOING TO EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

As much as Walsh builds on Dewey, her interpretation also does not touch on some aspects of his philosophy of experience that are relevant to a theory of experiential knowledge, such as his view of experience as a form of undergoing. It would nevertheless be hard to detect the full value that Dewey’s position has on

12 Ibid., 34.

13 Ibid., 71–72.

14 Ibid., 136–37.

15 Goodman develops the idea of exemplification in his *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 253–54.

16 Walsh, *Literature and Knowledge*, 103, 125.

understanding the connection between experiential knowledge and literature without the groundwork she has done on the issue. In this respect, Dewey's view should be thought of as an addition to her theory rather than to supersede it.

The main thrust of Dewey's philosophy is to criticize the influential epistemological framework in which propositional knowing is considered the highest form of experience, a framework he also called 'the spectator theory of knowledge'.¹⁷ In his view, such philosophical positions provide a very limited outlook on our experience, for example by downplaying its nonpropositional aspects, which Dewey argues can be phases of experience as real as propositional knowing, and which can, moreover, have a significant and legitimate place in deliberation, decision-making, and in cognition in general. For example, a sense of closure can serve as a valid indication that a good conclusion to a problematic situation has been reached. Also, Dewey believes that the human expectation of death is an important explanatory factor in the prosperity of insurance companies.¹⁸

Dewey seeks to return to nontechnical, everyday uses of the term experience and wonders why philosophers who have analysed experience with concepts like response, idea, or sense-datum have assumed that they get 'nearer to the reality of experience the further away [they get] from all the experience [they have] ever had'.¹⁹ He believes that his use of the term experience corresponds to the meanings 'the unsophisticated man' associates with it – namely, 'the life he has led and undergone in the world of persons and things'. Rather than propositional knowing or a state of consciousness with a clear content, experience in Dewey's sense is 'coarse' and 'Protean; a thing of moods and tenses'. From Dewey's viewpoint, philosophers have too often substituted 'a dialectical development of some notion about experience for an analysis of experience as it is humanly lived'.²⁰

A contrast between propositional knowing and experience as a form of undergoing is also central to Dewey's philosophy. For him, such things as 'having the gripe, or conducting a political campaign, or getting rid of an overstock of canned tomatoes, or going to school' are all experiences in the sense of undergoing. Even though such experiences are not connected to 'objects of knowledge' in any clear way, he insists that the meaning of experience he is trying to articulate is precisely 'what is meant in non-philosophic discourse by "an experience"'.²¹ Going to school is one of life's most important experiences. However, this scepticism does not mean experience in Dewey's sense would have no cognitive significance. On the contrary, undergoing an experience like conducting a political campaign can be edifying and educative.

Even though Walsh's account of experiential knowledge is in many ways more articulate than Dewey's at-times-murky philosophy of experience, the notion of undergoing manages to capture the educative and cognitive potency of nonpropositional experience better than Walsh's conception of realizing an experience by reading a literary work, which is why I will favour it in the second half of the paper. Experiential

17 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature: The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, vol. 1 (1925; Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 31–32.

18 Ibid., 370.

19 Ibid., 368.

20 Ibid., 367.

21 John Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), 5.

knowledge emerges from undergoing an experience. The notion of undergoing also involves a connotation to an activity and effort on the part of the experienter, which will be important for my goals below.

However, if experience is a matter of undergoing, and if the reader, in engaging with a literary work, also undergoes an experience, what is the relationship between the two? How can the latter tell something significant about the former? Or, to put it in Walsh's terms, how can a literary experience make a real-world experience more intelligible, as well as capture its qualitative feel? Although somewhat sceptical toward the idea of experiential knowledge, Gregory Currie thinks that literary works' apparent capacity to afford 'imaginative experiences of considerable richness involving sensory imagining in several modalities along with cognitive and emotional elements' gives at least initial plausibility to the idea that literary works can acquaint readers with what it is like to experience something.²² Alison Denham concurs. She examines the themes of experiential knowledge with the concept of 'experience-taking', which refers to the attempt to take on the perceptions as well the mental and affective states of someone else. By combining conceptual, perceptual, and affective aspects of language, literary works and especially poetry can, in her view, 'call forth experiences in the form of imaginings, memories, desires, and the emotions and moods these evoke' and, thereby, allow the reader to get a sense of how certain experiences, such as Denham's example of 'ethical estrangement', feel from a subjective point of view.²³

It is hard to deny that the way in which the conceptual, the imaginative, and the affective are intertwined and even mutually reinforce one another in literary language must have an important role in any full account of the relationship between experiential knowledge and literature. What, however, also seems central and is less frequently emphasized is the fact that the exact character of the experience a literary work addresses is rarely fully spelled out. Instead, the feel of the experience is left for the reader to figure out for herself from the 'signposts' of the text, as Currie puts it in an earlier paper.²⁴ This is precisely a literary technique that, I believe, renders the literary experience into a form of undergoing in Dewey's sense. The reader no longer merely registers the features of the depicted experiences but starts to take part in their construction.

The mechanism of experiential knowledge might bear some relationship to metaphor. Arthur Danto, at least, makes the point that a statue portraying Napoleon as a Roman emperor is not only intended to get the audience to infer that Napoleon is a mighty figure, but to *feel* his might.²⁵ Such indirect engagement of the reader, I believe, also underlies experiential knowledge the character of which is best explored with the help of a concrete literary case.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is one of the landmark works of American literature of the latter part of the twentieth century. It is situated in middle of nineteenth-century America, before and after the country's abolishment of slavery. The novel centres around the figure of Sethe, a former slave who has escaped from the slave plantation 'The Sweet Home' to Cincinnati to her three children and mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. During her escape, Sethe gives birth to a fourth child, Denver. At the beginning of the

22 Currie, *Imagining and Knowing*, 101.

23 Denham, 'Ethical Estrangement', 199.

24 Currie, 'Moral Psychology of Fiction', 256.

25 Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 171–73.

novel, the American Civil War (1861–1865), which marked the end of official slavery in the country, is already past, but this historical period has a strong presence in the work through the flashbacks of slavery, showed especially from the perspectives of the novel's principal characters, Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Paul D, as well as through the effects that the experience is depicted to have had on them.

Beloved includes number of depictions of the experiences the characters encountered during slavery, from Sethe's brutal whipping to Paul D's humiliation of being publicly chained to a bridle. These sorts of events made it clear to the black principal characters that 'definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined'.²⁶ The novel's portrayal of slavery, however, also has a deeper level in that *Beloved* is not just a collection of descriptions of separate events related to slavery, but it also gives a feel especially of how its principal characters cope with the experience in their post slavery life in the sense of undergoing, as laid out above.

The literary researcher Klaus Brax investigates the different aspects of the experiential sphere of *Beloved* with the concept of social death, deriving from the cultural sociologist Orlando Patterson. According to Brax, the experience of slavery has made the principal characters of Morrison's novel incapable of constructing autonomous, self-subsistent identities and to create meaningful connections to other people, marked by solid bonds of love and trust; '[Paul D] knew exactly what [Sethe] meant: to get to a place where you love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire – well now, *that* was freedom.'²⁷ Instead, in Brax's words, the characters' identities are 'torn'.²⁸ Paul D, for example, is perplexed by Sethe's affection towards her daughter Denver:

Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one.²⁹

The fact that it is never explicitly told in the novel that a torn identity and the different features of social death, such as a general lack of trust, underly especially Sethe's and Paul D's experiences is an important factor why *Beloved* can serve as a potential vehicle of experiential knowledge; Morrison precisely shows these experiential underpinnings rather than explicitly tells what Sethe's and Paul D's *an* experiences of post slavery life are like, for example in the form 'Sethe felt incapable of sustaining her trust in Paul D'. Consequently, the reader, too, does not merely register what the characters experience but starts to acquire a fuller sense of what it is to undergo social death. This is also why I favour Dewey's notion of undergoing over Walsh's realization; experiential knowledge requires mental effort, or something Dewey calls 'doing', from the reader.

A key feature of *Beloved*, its fantasy elements, further emphasizes its principal characters' torn identities between an oppressive past and an attempt to build a future. The novel's story contains supernatural phenomena, but, as Brax points out,

26 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 225.

27 Ibid., italics in the original.

28 Klaus Brax, *Unhoon jääneiden huuto: Kolme tutkielmaa postmodernista historiallisesta romaanista* [The cry of the forgotten: Three essays on the postmodern historical novel] (Helsinki: Avain, 2017), 129.

29 Morrison, *Beloved*, 54.

it never becomes entirely clear how the reader should relate to them, as fantasies of the characters or as really happening in the world of the novel. Instead, a feeling of uncertainty penetrates the reading.³⁰

The supernatural elements of the novel are connected to the traces of slavery. Earlier in life, in a particularly dark moment, Sethe felt compelled to kill her new-born baby girl, her third child, to save her from the horrors of slavery. Now, the deceased baby has settled into Sethe's home, called 124, as a ghost to haunt its inhabitants and to take out her anger on them by making noises and other sorts of nuisances from behind her invisibility. The mystical character of Beloved is the novel's other important fantasy element. In the beginning of the novel, Paul D, after having arrived at 124, manages to drive away the embittered baby ghost from the house but, shortly afterwards, a young girl introducing herself as Beloved appears at 124. Sethe becomes highly affectionate towards the girl and, gradually, both Sethe and Denver become convinced that Beloved is the reincarnation of Sethe's deceased baby girl. Denver, Beloved, and Sethe begin living like a family until Beloved's behaviour transgresses, in its malevolence, all bounds of civility. Again, it remains an open issue whether Beloved truly is the reincarnation of Sethe's deceased baby or just a young girl who managed to flee from imprisonment.³¹

The haunting 124 and the figure of Beloved are both signs of Sethe's slavery past, as well as of the different levels of her experience, and they point to the ways in which she experiences that past; the past presents itself to Sethe as something persistently discomfiting and haunting, feeling almost too unreal to believe. As Brax also notes, Sethe's experience is significantly nonlinear.³² The seemingly supernatural elements of the novel can be seen to symbolize Sethe's grappling with her past and, at the same time, slavery is shown to be something from which one cannot just scramble away and which it is almost impossible to come to terms with fully. Because of its irresolvable supernatural elements, an attentive reading of *Beloved* engenders an experience that is marked by an uncertainty and search for sense similar to those its main characters are depicted to undergo.

The many powerful descriptions of freedom and trust of the novel also show the long shadow of slavery in the lives of its characters. These experiences figure as kinds of oases amid an otherwise uncertain life. A particularly effective example is the scene where Baby Suggs experiences her hands and heartbeat in a completely new way after being freed from slavery by her son's payment:

Something's the matter. What's the matter? What's the matter? [Baby Suggs] asked herself. She didn't know what she looked like and was not curious. But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These my hands.' Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud. [...] She couldn't stop laughing. 'My heart's beating,' she said. And it was true.³³

30 Brax, *Unhoon jääneiden huuto*, 127.

31 Morrison, *Beloved*, 276–77. See also Brax, *Unhoon jääneiden huuto*, 151.

32 Brax, *Unhoon jääneiden huuto*, 147.

33 Morrison, *Beloved*, 166.

For the experiential effect of this scene, it is central that Baby Suggs is not explicitly told to be experiencing freedom and autonomy. Morrison shows rather than tells what it is like to experience these things. A too direct description of Baby Suggs's state of mind, for example, of the form 'Baby Suggs experiences her heartbeat as freedom' would not have raised in the reader the undergoing required by experiential knowledge, which in this case concerns what it is like to experience the capacity to command one's hands and listening to one's heartbeat as forms of experiencing freedom and autonomy. Walsh, too, points to the indirect character of such descriptions; their power is based on the author's 'restraint in explanation'.³⁴ The author calls on the reader to take part in constructing the feel of the experience herself from the indirect description. Precisely such undergoing, I argue, lies at the heart of experiential knowledge.

IV. THE LEVELS OF EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

As powerful an example as *Beloved* is, it also raises some worries for a proponent of the idea experiential knowledge. It would, of course, be highly questionable or even immoral to assume that the experience Morrison's novel raises in a well-doing contemporary reader would somehow correspond to the experience of slavery.³⁵

One possible response to this conundrum is to say that experiential knowledge has different levels. The idea of experiential knowledge does not assume that literature gives a complete account of what it is like to undergo a certain experience. This, however, does not imply that literature could not give *any* knowledge about the matter. László Kajtár, for example, argues that the experiential knowledge acquired from a literary work is still an epistemic gain compared to having no experience at all.³⁶ Even an attentive reader of *Beloved* does not know everything there is to know about what it is to grapple with the experience of slavery, but she still knows more than someone who has not read Morrison's novel. Our knowledge of what it is like to experience something can take different levels of depth and precision, and literature can help us to achieve a better grasp of what experiences are like, even if it cannot be the whole story.

There also does not seem to be any reason why the seeming differences between literary experiences and real-world experiences would undercut literature's capacity to serve as a source of experiential knowledge. Some experience can give knowledge of another one, even if there are also differences between the two experiences, just as a representation can give knowledge of what it represents even if the experience of the representation differs from the experience of the object of representation. Gaining a feel of what some experience is like does not require that one undergoes the same exact experience.

Similar ideas have already been developed in the philosophical literature on experience and emotions. For example, Edith Stein claims that in successful acts of empathy we experience someone else's original thoughts and emotions in a 'non-original' way (*Nichtoriginarität*),³⁷ while some philosophers of emotion think that emotions can also

34 Walsh, *Literature and Knowledge*, 84.

35 John Gibson, for example, raises such worries in the idea of experiential knowledge in his 'Cognitivism in the Arts', *Philosophy Compass* 3 (2008): 573–89.

36 Kajtár, 'What Mary Didn't Read', 343.

37 Edith Stein, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* (1917; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 15–16. See also Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 3rd revised ed., trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS, 1987), 6–8.

be felt in a secondary sense, which, for example, is the case when we try to distance ourselves from certain emotions of ours.³⁸ Even though, in both cases, the experienced experience is not equivalent to the original or primary experience, it can nevertheless open a meaningful perspective on the original experience. I believe that there can also be this type of relationship between a real-world experience and a literary experience. The possibility of such a relationship shows that literary works can provide the reader with a feel of actual experiences.

These points can still be strengthened by responding to some of the ethical worries related to experiential knowledge. It is important to note that experiences can be highly personal things and that they can also relate to the most fundamental features of our identity. They can also involve painful, even traumatic events, and such experiences can, moreover, heavily colour our perception of the world. Our experiences can also bring forth our vulnerability, for example when we feel someone to belittle experiences that have had a significant impact on us. For these reasons, it could be argued to be almost morally questionable to assume that we can know what the experiences of people with very different backgrounds and life situations from our own are like.

Leila Haaparanta draws attention to similar ethical considerations in relation to empathy. She argues that an attempt to get a grip of someone's mental states and feelings must involve acknowledging the limits of empathy and the empathizer must also be cautious of being overly confident that the mental states and feelings she feels truly match the mental states and feelings of the object of her empathy. Only such caution, Haaparanta thinks, makes empathy morally sustainable.

According to Haaparanta, one way of meeting these challenges is to emphasize the abstract nature of the knowledge gained through empathy. That is, empathy does not concern some concrete feelings in their here-and-there specificity but rather emotion types, such as joy and fear. She illuminates this difference with a distinction, deriving from Edmund Husserl, between general and individual understanding; empathy has to do with grasping general emotional features. This opens the possibility of keeping hold of the idea that we can, indeed, share the mental states and feelings of other people on an abstract or general level without falling to the presumption that, when empathizing, we undergo the same exact emotions as the object of our empathy.³⁹

It is possible to also develop a morally sustainable version of experiential knowledge that takes into account Haaparanta's reflections on empathy. First, experience, too, can be seen to divide into different types. For example, the experience of failing in love and the experience of being unemployed could be argued to belong to the same experience type of loss. Moreover, it seems that experiences can be divided into principal and sub experiences. In *Beloved*, for example, the experience of slavery is divided into different forms of social death. Social death can, in turn, characterize experiences other than slavery. Rather than isolated atoms, experiences should be understood as constituting a holistic web in which different experiences are intertwined and can overlap with one another. This again implies that two experiences can be related in a way that undergoing the one gives insight into the other, even though the experiences are not exactly the same.

38 See, for example, Damien Freeman, *Art's Emotion: Ethics, Expression, and Aesthetic Experience* (London: Routledge, 2012), 75–85.

39 Leila Haaparanta, 'On Knowing the Other's Emotions', in *Husserl's Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity: Historical Interpretations and Contemporary Applications*, ed. Frode Kjosavik, Christian Beyer, and Christel Fricke (New York: Routledge, 2019), 165–77.

Second, literature can be thought to give knowledge of experiences on the kind of general level Haaparanta identifies as the content of empathy. To take another literary example, Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel* need not be thought to give knowledge of a concrete concentration camp experience but rather about what it is like to experience a horrid event analytically, even coldly, without emotional wallowing.

These distinctions and refinements, again, show that experiential knowledge can involve different levels of accuracy and depth. I, however, see no principled reason why a literary experience could not be connected to a real-world experience such that the former can be said to illuminate the latter. There are various inroads to experiences and, at its best, literature can be a powerful vehicle for gaining insight into what it is like to undergo different sorts of experiences.

V. THE EPISTEMICALLY VIRTUOUS AUTHOR

One issue still needs to be addressed. There might, indeed, be a connection between literary experiences and actual experiences, but it is not entirely clear what are the grounds for treating the former experience as a source of knowledge. Or, to frame the issue slightly differently: what justifies the reader to form beliefs about the feel of experiences based on a literary work? As I already noted in the introduction, Walsh claims that we are in many cases justified to rely on the advice and beliefs of someone with a certain sort of experience. The experience she has had explains her epistemic authority over a certain range of issues. This claim suggests that the required epistemic grounding of experiential knowledge could be built upon the qualities of the author and of her creative act more generally.

Especially in cases where a novel emerges from the author's own experiences the author could be said to have some level of epistemic authority over the topic of her work. The literary work turns out to be a kind of testimony of the author's own experiences. For example, novels depicting experiences related to multiculturalism, such as those by Zadie Smith, Monika Ali, and Jhumpa Lahiri, often have this sort of background. However, this response has its limits, at least as a general explanation of the justification of experiential knowledge. For example, *Beloved* depicts experiences of which Morrison has no first-hand experience, although in her life she might have experienced forms of discrimination and racism less severe than slavery.

Another type of solution, however, seems possible. Noël Carroll, for example, argues that we are entitled to trust the epistemic perspectives of many realist novels because the ability to depict reality in perceptive and epistemically virtuous ways is part of what it means to be a great realist author. He calls this capacity 'the art of observation'.⁴⁰ It seems that experience-articulating novels like *Beloved* can rest on a similar epistemic foundation.

It is somewhat odd how rarely it is emphasized, in epistemological accounts of literature, that composing novels with great historical depth, especially ones like *Beloved*, can involve a significant amount of research and study by the author. The ability to write such a novel requires a mixture of vast factual knowledge and the ability to articulate and express cognitive insights and perspectives in a literary form. As with realist authors, according to Carroll, it just seems to be a widely held

40 Noël Carroll, 'Literary Realism, Recognition, and the Communication of Knowledge', in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, ed. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer, and Luca Bocci (New York: Routledge, 2007), 36–37.

cultural assumption that some authors have the capacity to enter different kinds of experiential worlds based on their background research. It is hard to believe that this assumption would have no foundation in reality.

Work on epistemic trust in social epistemology helps to strengthen these initial points. Linda Zagzebski, for example, argues that, as it is impossible to form beliefs by oneself or to have first-hand confirmation of all of our beliefs, we should be on the lookout for figures she calls 'epistemic exemplars', who can help us to hold beliefs with good epistemic credentials and to believe in better ways more generally.⁴¹ Such figures are in a way improved versions of ourselves, in that their belief formation exemplifies epistemic qualities that we trust in ourselves insofar as we are 'epistemically conscientious'. Zagzebski continues:

[The epistemic exemplar] may have special insights that I trust, and in many cases I would not have those insights if I were forming the belief independently. The general point is that an epistemic authority is someone who does what I would do if I were more conscientious or better than I am at satisfying the aim of conscientiousness – getting at the truth.⁴²

The epistemically exemplary figure is exemplary precisely in the sense that I feel her to be more successful in the epistemic endeavours that I value and strive to achieve.⁴³ I see no reason why some authors could not evolve into these types of epistemic agents, thereby also enhancing the epistemic credibility of their literary output. It seems that, for Zadie Smith, Morrison is precisely this sort of exemplary figure. She writes:

Like a lot of black girls of my generation, I placed Morrison, in her single person, in an impossible role [...] No writer should have to bear such a burden. What's extraordinary about Morrison is that she not only wanted that burden, she was equal to it. She knew we needed her to be not just a writer but a discourse and she became one, making her language out of whole cloth, and conceiving of each novel as a project, as a mission – never as mere entertainment.⁴⁴

Although Smith's description of Morrison concerns issues that go beyond epistemology, it nevertheless suggests that literary authors can indeed meet the conditions Zagzebski sets for epistemic exemplariness and, hence, we have good epistemic grounds to take the works of such authors seriously, when reflecting on what to think about the issues they deal with.

Another possibility for grounding epistemic trust in literary works is by referring to the epistemic virtues they embody. Again, social epistemologists like Zagzebski argue that epistemic trust can be explained in terms of epistemic virtues. Among such virtues, she lists, for example, the following qualities: intellectual honesty, fairness, attentiveness, carefulness, thoroughness, perseverance, courage, and generosity.⁴⁵ These are all qualities that, in her view, go 'beyond the minimum for

41 Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 132–33.

42 Ibid., 111.

43 Ibid., 93.

44 Zadie Smith, 'Daughters of Toni Morrison: A Remembrance', *Pen America*, 7 August 2019, <https://pen.org/daughters-of-toni/>.

45 Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Values: Collected Papers in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 96, 100.

being epistemically respectable'.⁴⁶ Epistemic virtues make us into 'effective epistemic agents'.⁴⁷ Zagzebski writes:

We admire people who are open-minded, intellectually careful, thorough, humble, courageous, and fair, and we usually don't ask if they succeed in getting the truth before admiring them, but we think that the point of having these intellectual virtues is to help us and our community find out the truth.⁴⁸

Again, I see no reason why the work of literary authors could not exemplify these types of epistemic virtues. Carroll's concept of the art of observation already points in this direction. In the case of experiential knowledge, epistemic trust in literature can be founded on a combination of the author's epistemic exemplariness and her ability to convey the feel of experiences in epistemically virtuous ways. Literary works, indeed, might not tell everything there is to know about a certain experience, but attentive readers of novels like *Beloved* can be said, with good reason, to know more than those who have not read them about the experiences that such epistemically ambitious works tackle.

VI. CONCLUSION

It seems evident that experiences can have a feel to them and that, in some cases, the qualitative feel of experiences can be an aspect of them as important as their content; the how matters as much as the what. Insight into the feel of different experiences, therefore, opens an important perspective on human life. Although Walsh and Dewey, the original inspirations of my account, were less relevant to the ethical and epistemic considerations of the second half of the paper, my key points on experiential knowledge, nevertheless, rest on their work. Experiential knowledge emerges from an undergoing that Walsh initially scrutinized and the full force of which can be drawn out with the help of Dewey's philosophy of experience.

That literature has a strong connection to the aspects of our lives, which the notion of experiential knowledge is intended to capture, is supported by various factors. For example, it is not uncommon to hear authors explicitly express the attempt to get hold of the feel of experiences as a key interest of their literary art. The author Arundhati Roy writes: 'A human rights report cannot describe how continuous threatening and intimidation create an atmosphere of fear. Through fiction, it is possible to tell how it feels when an intelligence officer comes for a visit and provokes his dog to attack.'⁴⁹ Similarly, Carmen Gillespie writes:

In *Beloved*, there is an attempt to enter the consciousness of individuals who were enslaved and to animate the feelings that must have been associated with so much uncertainty, loss, and violation. In the novel, that personification is made manifest in the character Beloved. Beloved can be seen as a representation, a personification of all the trauma and catastrophic human cost of [...] slavery.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁹ Harri Römppötti, 'Arundhati Roy ja pelon ilmapiiri' [Arundhati Roy and the climate of fear], *Suomen Kuvalehti* 40 (2017): 56.

⁵⁰ Carmen Gillespie, *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* (New York: Facts On File, 2008), 19.

Besides authors' pronouncements on the goals of their creative endeavours, the fact that some literary works can resonate particularly strongly, for example, in specific human groups and generations shows literature's intimate connection to experience. Some works may even earn labels like 'the picture of the times' or 'the voice of a generation', which capture the zeitgeist of some period in an effective way. Even though literary reading has been in a steady decline for decades, one can still at times sense even a yearn for a novel that would manage to seize the feel of a certain event or happening; Covid-19 might be a good example here. All these cases, I believe, concern aspects of human life similar to those the concept of experiential knowledge is intended to capture, that is, what it is like to belong to a certain group or to live during a certain period. I hope this paper has rendered these intuitions about literature into a philosophically more credible position on the cognitive value of literature.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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