

# ART & THE EMOTIONS: *Debating the work of Jenefer Robinson*

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Jenefer Robinson's work has been motivated by two central concerns: Firstly, to characterise the nature of the emotions, and second, to provide an account of how the emotions are involved in various aspects of art appreciation. In this issue, some of her critics attempt to put pressure on, or develop, some aspect of her influential contributions to these projects in their respective articles, and Robinson replies to each in turn (pp. 95-121).

Vanessa Brassey (pp. 15-29) turns to examine some of Robinson's more recent views on the relationship between art and the emotions. One of Brassey's primary aims in her article is to reveal one of the distinctive advantages of Robinson's personalist account of pictorial expression over its impersonalist rivals. Brassey suggests that we should favour Robinson's personalism on the grounds that what is expressed by some paintings is not exhausted by what is expressed by the figures, scene or design of a painting. This additional expressive meaning is not, according to Brassey, "derived from the formal (visible) qualities of the picture surface"<sup>1</sup>, but rather comes from our impression of the person executing the picture.

Brassey offers the example of Hopper's 'NightHawks', observing that the juxtaposition of the mask-like faces with the

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<sup>1</sup> Brassey 2019, p. 23.

sophisticated air of the picture overall results in the viewer experiencing a “richness and elusiveness of style” (following a discussion of Klee by Kendall Walton).<sup>2</sup> Brassey suggests that this experience of richness is dependent on having the impression that it is executed by a skilled painter adopting a naïve style rather than a “naïve illustrator”.<sup>3</sup>

This idea is heartily embraced by Robinson in her reply (pp. 95-101), but one might have a couple of worries here. First, one might wonder whether experiencing “a richness and elusiveness of style” is indeed a case of expression. Even if this is granted, one might also worry that a personalist account of pictorial expression isn’t needed to accommodate such cases. The impression of mystery in ‘NightHawks’ seems connected to features that are internal to the work, just as impersonalists such as Lopes allow: the sense of mystery seems to merely be generated by noting the tension between the mask-like rendering of the faces and e.g. the clean depiction of the streetscape. Why do we need an implied persona to account for interactions such as this?

Of course, on Lopes’ particular variety of impersonalism, there may not be room for such cases. In her reply to Brassey, Robinson locates the problem Brassey identifies in her description of what a painting conveys overall as the ‘design expression’ (using Lopes’ taxonomy) in the narrowness of Lopes’ characterisation of this concept. The same problem seems to crop up here. Since the design expression is for Lopes “expression that is wholly attributable to a picture’s design or surface and not to any figure or scene it depicts”<sup>4</sup>, it cannot accommodate interactions such as that between the mask-like appearances of the figures and the depiction of the streetscape. As a result, perhaps a fourth kind of expression of the kind that Robinson outlines in her reply and which we might term (to use a

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<sup>2</sup> Walton 1976, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> Brassey 2019, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Lopes 2005, p. 57.

cue from Robinson) ‘compositional expression’ is needed by impersonalists.

Brassey also expresses some doubt about Robinson’s claim that “the creation of expressive content should be understood as a transitive act of expression” on the grounds that the implied painter is a psychological extension of the painter.<sup>5</sup> Brassey suggests that this implies that painters cannot create implied personae that are distinct from themselves, and deploys the counterexample of Tolstoy: a writer who was able to express compassion in his work while lacking compassion in life.

While acknowledging the force of this point, Robinson responds by implying that the implied persona has *enough* in common with the painter to express the painter’s state of mind. But this seems to be precisely what Brassey is denying: a novelist might *merely entertain* e.g. what it is like to be cruel and indifferent in the process of creating passages or works that are expressive of these, even if the novelist is herself only capable of being kind and concerned.

An alternative response which is not suggested by Brassey or pursued by Robinson here but is arguably latent in Robinson’s work on pictorial expression would be to argue that such cases are of a piece with Calvin Klein adverts. These cases might best be regarded as *techné*, and not of transitive, or indeed, pictorial expression. According to this thought, such artworks would be mimicking expression, rather than truly expressing. The question then, however, would be whether this response would be convincing, given that such works are *prima facie* expressive?

Mary Beth Willard (pp. 30-44) engages with Robinson’s answer to the paradox of fiction. Following Gendler and Kovakovich (2006), Willard formulates the paradox as the mutual incompatibility of three claims: (i) we have genuine and rational emotional

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<sup>5</sup> Brassey 2019, p. 17.

responses to fictions; (ii) we believe that fictional entities don't exist; and (iii) we must believe that characters exist in order to have genuine and rational emotions towards them. Willard implies that Robinson, as an advocate of an embodied account of the emotions, rejects premise (iii): since emotions involve non-cognitive appraisals—which are not sensitive to the ontological status of their objects—we can have emotions in response to fictions.

One might worry that this does not quite capture the contours of Robinson's position. As Willard notes, and Robinson affirms in her response, Robinson regards our emotional responses to fictions as *irrational*. That is, Robinson seems to reject (i) and (iii). One problem here lies in the way the paradox has been formulated. Premises (i) and (ii) feature a conjunction of two distinct properties—genuineness *and* rationality. A gold ring can be genuine in the sense that it is actually gold and not, say, coated steel, but it is not thereby rational. It doesn't seem as though we can accurately capture Robinson's view on the paradox of fiction without being sensitive to this distinction: Robinson believes that we have *genuine* emotions in response to fictions in the sense that they're *actually* emotions (i.e. sadness in response to a fiction is the same kind of thing as sadness in life<sup>6</sup>), but she doesn't believe those emotions are *rational*. Why aren't they rational for Robinson? Because both the content of the affective appraisal and the cognitive monitoring system which together constitute emotions for Robinson represent states of affairs that can or cannot truly exist. The content of the affective appraisals and cognitive monitoring involved in episodes of

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<sup>6</sup> Gendler and Kovakovich (2006) intend genuineness in Walton's (1990) sense of lacking motivational force and existential commitment. Setting the latter aside for reasons that Gendler and Kovakovich specify (2006, p. 249), the general idea here is that the emotions had in response to fictions are not the same—functionally or otherwise—to emotions had in response to their real-life counterparts. Robinson denies this.

fear is something like DANGER<sup>7</sup> (albeit non-conceptually in the case of the affective appraisal). And states of affairs can actually be dangerous or not. Sitting in a horror film is not dangerous but being pursued by someone with murderous intent is.

Setting this aside, Willard claims that Robinson *should not* say that our emotional responses to fiction are irrational on the grounds that the characters and situations presented are fictional. Indeed, Willard suggests that our emotional responses, when appropriate according to the relevant norms, are rational. It seems important to clearly locate where the disagreement between Willard and Robinson lies, if indeed any exists. Robinson (pp. 102-107) for her part claims that our responses to fiction are irrational in just the sense spelled out above. If truth is the standard by which our activities are measured, then emotional engagement with fictions is not rational: we represent objects which are not e.g. dangerous as if they were. But, setting this kind of irrationality aside, Robinson notes that there are other ways in which our emotional responses to fictional objects are rational. They may, for example, be rational in the sense that they are adaptive.

This is not the grounds for rationality that Willard has in mind though. Willard's sense of rationality is prudential *and* internal to the activity of art appreciation: it is rational to emote given our aim to appreciate artworks on their own terms.

Robinson welcomes this suggestion but disagrees with Willard's specific proposal for understanding rationality here. There is surely further work to be done on this, as Robinson and Willard both note. But to gesture towards one of the directions this might take in the future: Robinson's worry that Willard's second criterion is tautological may be able to be assuaged by understanding the criterion as governing when a response is *rational* in the relevant

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<sup>7</sup> It is in virtue of the fact that they are about the same content that the cognitive monitoring system is *relevant* to the operation of the quick-and-dirty components.

sense (rather than appropriate), a perspective which is more in line with the general spirit of Willard's article in any case.

Quixote Vassilakis (pp. 60-73) puts pressure on Robinson's claim that the emotions are necessary to understanding certain works of art, and indeed suggests that the *absence* of emotional responses may actually enhance understanding of those works. In arguing for these claims, Vassilakis points out that psychopaths have emotional deficits but may have an enhanced ability to read the emotions of others, and that there is evidence that the emotions can lead us astray in forming literary interpretations.

In responding to the former argument, Robinson (pp. 111-114) makes a number of points: that psychopaths are not a relevant population from which to draw principles about how to read a novel; psychopaths can infer emotions but not how they feel; and psychopaths don't care. These responses suggest that Robinson and Vassilakis may be operating with different concepts. On the one hand, we might intend UNDERSTANDING in the strict sense of merely comprehending. We deploy this concept when we e.g. ask whether somebody understands the solution to a maths problem. It is this sense of understanding that Vassilakis seems to be targeting. On the other hand, we sometimes refer to understanding in another sense, namely to comprehend *and care* in the right way. We deploy this kind of understanding when we e.g. ask whether someone was understanding about a mishap caused by adverse circumstances. It is this sense of understanding that Robinson seems to intend. This distinction seems crucial, as emotional responses might be necessary for understanding in one sense but not the other.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to operating with different notions of understanding, Vassilakis and Robinson seem to interpret the nature of the claim that the emotions are necessary for understanding some works in different ways. Vassilakis seems to interpret Robinson as defending a strong metaphysical claim. But in her reply, Robinson seems to suggest that she intends a weaker, prudential claim concerning "principles about how to read a novel in a normal way" (p. 113).

As Vassilakis presses, it may be the case that someone with emotional deficits could understand perfectly well what is going on in a novel, without having any concern for the characters that feature therein. But it is far more difficult to see how understanding in the second sense can be done without emoting. Indeed, to the extent that being sympathetic is an emotional state, it seems that the emotions may be logically built into this sense of understanding.

One might not be persuaded by Robinson's worry that the conclusions that can be drawn from psychopaths about the necessity of emotions for understanding are limited because psychopaths come from a small pathological population. If psychopaths demonstrate e.g. a selective inability to feel emotions generally and they can still understand others emotional reactions<sup>9</sup>, then they are presumably doing this with non-affective psychological capacities which are shared by the readers that Robinson has in mind.

As a result, while it may be difficult for us non-psychopaths to imagine being able to understand emotionally-relevant situations without feeling, as many of the psychological mechanisms involved in emoting are automatic and mandatory (as Robinson notes), the case of psychopaths may provide us with a precious opportunity to see what the other non-emotional mechanisms we have in our heads may be doing when we're reading great realist fiction. In this regard, the method deployed by Vassilakis is structurally similar to Robinson's appeal to Joseph LeDoux's dissociation experiments in 'Deeper than Reason'.

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<sup>9</sup> This characterisation is favoured by, e.g. Vassilakis 2019 and Prinz 2011. In her recent synthesis of the evidence on the deficits that psychopaths present, Maibom (forthcoming) suggests that shallow affect is characteristic of a subset of psychopaths—sometimes called *primary* psychopaths. It is important to note that psychopaths's recognition abilities are not entirely intact: they have been shown to have a deficit in recognising emotional facial expressions, e.g. Iria & Barbosa 2009. However, it is not clear that this damages Vassilakis' point given that he and Robinson are concerned with literary understanding.

A second way of carving up the domain of understanding arises from Robinson's discussion of Konrad et al's data argument. Eva-Maria Konrad, Thomas Petaschka and Christiana Werner (pp. 44-58) suggest that we can glean, for example, that Strether is mildly amusing, and that Anna is in a desperate situation without emoting. Robinson's response is intriguing: "there is an important difference between 'understanding' in the abstract, and understanding with your gut".<sup>10</sup> Here again, if the relevant sense of understanding is understanding with your gut, then it is difficult to see how the emotions couldn't be necessary, especially given Robinson's non-cognitive conception of the emotions. But it is interesting to gloss this distinction in a different way, namely as between superficial and deep understanding (as referenced in the title of Robinson's (2005) monograph). One question is whether *that* distinction carves along emotional-non-emotional lines?

One way into this issue is by thinking about whether the evaluative properties discussed by Konrad et al and Robinson—such as being amusing or desperate—should be understood in terms of emotional dispositions<sup>11</sup> or in terms of a second-order sentimentalism.<sup>12</sup> For comic moralists, for example, whether a character is amusing or not is a matter of whether they warrant laughter, not whether they do in fact tend to elicit laughter. As Elisabeth Anderson notes:

A person may laugh at a racist joke, but may be embarrassed at her laughter. Her embarrassment reflects a judgement that her amusement was not an appropriate response to the joke. The joke was

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<sup>10</sup> Robinson 2019, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> As Konrad et al 2019 advocate, at pp. 55-56.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g. D'Arms 2005.

not genuinely good or funny; it did not merit laughter.<sup>13</sup>

If some such kind of neo-sentimentalism about evaluative properties is right, then it might naturally be thought that understanding that it is warranted to feel the relevant emotion in a given case (rather than anyone actually feeling the relevant emotion) is what determines whether one *deeply understands* that a character or situation is amusing or desperate. And such an understanding looks to be a cognitive rather than emotional activity.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, given that Robinson's account of the emotions as processes includes a hierarchy of processing—from affective appraisal to cognitive monitoring—such a neo-sentimentalist position, and the corollary of such a position for the necessity of the emotions for understanding, actually look apposite to Robinson's wider view of the emotions.<sup>15</sup>

As such, whether the emotions are even required for understanding whether a given aspect of a work really has evaluative properties that seem to intimately involve the emotions—such as having amusing characters—may seem far from trivial.

Standing back, one of the general points that may be thought to emerge from the exchanges between Willard, Vassilakis, Konrad et al and Robinson is that Robinson's idea that emotions are two-stage processes involving non-cognitive appraisals and cognitive monitoring may, when developed in the right way, unexpectedly put pressure on some of her positions on aesthetic questions—such as whether the emotions are necessary for understanding certain works, and whether our emotional responses to fictions are irrational.

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<sup>13</sup> Anderson 1993, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> A similar conclusion is suggested by Vassilakis when he argues that the emotions bias us, and suggests that it is the cognitive monitoring processes that are the truth-makers when it comes to literary interpretations.

<sup>15</sup> They also seem consistent with the view Robinson lays out in 2010, p. 77.

Whereas Vassilakis and Konrad et al both take Robinson's account of the emotions on its own terms and attempt to challenge the strength of Robinson's claims that the emotions are central to successfully engaging with some works, Irene Martínez Marín (pp. 74-94) takes the opposite tack. She argues that Robinson's account of the emotions is not able to deftly handle higher cognitive emotions (such as nostalgia) in addition to the basic emotions. Partly as a result of this, she suggests that Robinson underestimates the ways that the emotions are involved in engaging with certain artworks.

Focusing on the case of nostalgia, Martínez Marín argues that Robinson's non-cognitive account of the emotions cannot accommodate nostalgia on the grounds that nostalgia constitutively involves reflection on "the irrevocability of one's own past"<sup>16</sup>—an appraisal that is too cognitive to count among the affective appraisals that Robinson claims lie at the heart of the emotions. Martínez Marín continues by suggesting that these higher cognitive emotions are central to the appreciation of some of the 'intellectual' artworks that Robinson implies do not need to be engaged with emotionally. Nor indeed, according to Martínez Marín, is Robinson's work on empathy able to be purposed to accommodate such cases.

Robinson (pp. 114-119), for her part, defends against the thrust of Martínez Marín's suggestion by questioning whether we should consider nostalgia an emotion on the grounds it is partly constituted by a set of reflections. Robinson suggests that we should regard nostalgia as a 'long-term' emotion rather than an emotion proper.

Some might worry that the considerations Robinson brings to bear to justify this deflation are not entirely decisive. It is not clear, for example, why the fact that nostalgia is partly constituted by reflections disqualifies it from being an emotion. Certainly, nostalgia seems to *prima facie* be an emotion—we commonly talk about "feeling nostalgic", and nostalgia seems to have a complex valence and phenomenology. As Robinson notes, the phenomenology of

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<sup>16</sup> Martínez Marín 2019, pp.75-76.

nostalgia is more than a blend of sadness and happiness. Nor is it clear why nostalgia should be thought to be a long-term emotion. The object of the emotion is necessarily some temporal distance from us, but it is not clear why the *emotion itself* needs to be attributed to individuals for a long period of time. It seems common to feel *flashes* of nostalgia when one tastes, smells, hears, or sees something that reminds one of one's past and is regarded as irrevocable.

Notwithstanding this, even if nostalgia is an emotion (long-term or otherwise), it is not clear that the basic and higher cognitive emotions do indeed form a single natural kind<sup>17</sup> such that a unified account is desirable. This may be significant for Martínez Marín given that Robinson's aim in 'Deeper than Reason' is, at least in part, to characterise a set of psychological states that function in the same way, rather than make prescriptions about what we should call emotions based on an analysis of the term.

Perhaps then, as Robinson herself notes in the close of her reply, further independent work (such as that provided by Martínez Marín) is warranted on the place of states such as nostalgia in the ecology of the mind, and how they relate to works of art.

The second half of this issue focuses on issues that are germane to both the spirit and content of the first half, and indeed the guiding principles of this journal more generally. In his piece, Hans Maes (pp. 122-130) reflects on his recent book of interviews with prominent philosophers of art—including Jenefer Robinson—to trace the way that formats such as conversations can contribute to philosophical progress in the current publishing environment. In addition to noting the dialectical similarities between philosophy as it is done in journal articles and in conversation, Maes traces six ways in which conversations are uniquely placed to contribute, including

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<sup>17</sup> See Griffiths 1997.

revealing tensions and unifying commitments in a given philosopher's oeuvre.

Angelo Cioffi's (pp. 131-176) interview with Murray Smith exhibits the lattermost advantage of doing philosophy-in-conversation exceptionally well. The most prominent idea to emerge from the interview is the strength and depth of Smith's commitment to the naturalistic enterprise in philosophy: Smith not only believes that philosophers should present theories that are, at a bare minimum, consistent with the relevant scientific findings, but they should preferably try to synthesise relevant findings from different fields and at different levels of explanation or even collect data themselves. In their commitment to respect the findings of the cognitive sciences, Smith and Robinson, and indeed some of Robinson's critics here, share a common perspective.

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