CHAPTER 1

Modernizing Empathy, Locating Loss

> But art, if it means awareness of our own life, means also awareness of the lives of other people – for style for the writer, no less than colour for the painter, is a question not of technique but of vision: it is the revelation, which by direct and conscious methods would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain for ever the secret of every individual. Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist on the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world only, our own, we see that world multiply itself and we have at our disposal as many worlds as there are original artists, worlds more different one from the other than those which revolve in infinite space.[1]

I find it hard to imagine that anyone who has picked up my book, with its clear literary focus, can read that statement from Marcel Proust's final volume of *In Search of Lost Time* and not feel a thrill of recognition and, if not agreement, at least hope. The vision that Proust accords art (here he means literature, specifically) illuminates the singularity of every experience; literature reveals the differences, rather than the unity, between our understandings of the world. Art, in this formulation, occupies a privileged position as the catalyst to what could only be called an empathetic imagination, where we can "know what another person sees."

If we could just take these lines out of context and be gratified by their reassuring claim, I might not have felt compelled to write *Modernist Empathy*. Yet, of course, Proust's statement comes at the end of many volumes in which the narrator is unable to access not simply others' experiences, but also his own, except perhaps in brief retrospective glimpses; indeed, just a page earlier he has noted that it is almost impossible to know even oneself; art may be the one thing that can "make us fully

aware of that reality, remote from our daily preoccupations . . . that reality which it is very easy for us to die without ever having known and which is, quite simply, our life."[2] The issue is revealed: literature may provide the means (may, for Proust, provide the only means) for understanding the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences, including the understanding that is within oneself, but access to such moments is rare and fleeting, if ever experienced at all. Moreover, such knowledge may come at a price; the narrator goes on to think about love and the benefits of having suffered, for "it is only while we are suffering that we see certain things which at other times are hidden from us."[3] Knowledge and art emerge from such suffering; pain brings us the insight and the vision to render the world in such a way that it reveals what Proust describes as the reality beneath the surface.

Let me jump forward from Proust to a more contemporary literary moment – a speech given by the critic James Wood on a late September day in 2009, introducing the Turkish novelist and Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk, that year's Norton lecturer at Harvard. I was in the audience that day and was struck by Wood's introduction, which revolved around the issue of literature's project of imagining others and, therefore, of promoting empathy. People, Wood argued, believe that fiction expands our moral imagination through the act of viewing the world through another perspective – a proposition that is, he recognized, open for debate.[4] What Wood was arguing for (and was saying that Pamuk works toward in his own writing) was finding a balance between two extremes: absolute identification with characters versus absolute rejection of that possibility. He described how what we need is to experience some kind of middle ground between, on the one hand, engaging so deeply with a novel that we lose ourselves in the characters and their trials, often to the point of experiencing their frustrations and pain on a visceral level, and, on the other, rejecting the possibility of such engagement as a humanist fantasy. Literary empathy is important, Wood claimed, even if the practice is more fraught than people might believe.

I agree with this assessment, though perhaps not quite for the same reasons, and I argue in this book that modernist literature can show us both why empathy is more challenging than we might today assume, and why it is still essential to pursue. My argument goes a step further; I posit that there is a specifically *modernist* empathy that complicates our understanding of the empathetic act. As the lines from Proust suggest, there is something painful in the act of crossing the boundaries of the self and attempting to enter into another perspective; this acknowledgment and celebration of the inevitable loss and probable failure at the heart of any act

of perspective-taking characterizes the "modernist empathy" uncovered in this book. In short, modernist literature encourages us to enter other perspectives even as it also questions the very idea of a self and an other, and, hence, the very possibility of empathy.

Modernist Empathy argues that we must look back to modernist literature, which was written when the term "empathy" first came into circulation, in order to rediscover the complexity of empathy as an imaginative act. Attention to modernist literature's exploration of empathy reveals that every act of moving outside the perspective of the individual subject exposes the fragility and the isolation of each person's perspective; to empathize is to realize how alone and singular we actually may be. At the same time, we confront how hard it is to return after this movement outside the self; our sense of an uninhibited autonomy of perspective is gone. Modernist literature asks us to take the radical leap into otherness even as it reveals there is never a coherent self on which to base that leap. Yet it is only through attempts to reach outside of the idea of the "self" that we can come to realize the ephemerality and the contextual nature of our own subject positions. Modernist empathy is therefore paradoxical in its very nature and process.

Defining Empathy

My choice of the term "empathy" is deliberate and deserves some explanation; throughout the rest of this chapter I will further explore and contextualize theories of empathy, ending by explicating the three registers through which I read modernist literature's engagement with empathy: space, form, and psychology. But let me start with some background on the word itself. Even though empathy did not come into common parlance until the second and third decades of the twentieth century, both its emergence as a critical term during the rise of literary modernism and the dominance of its current use make it the most appropriate term for my examination.[5] In contemporary discussions, the idea of empathy has become part of everyday political and literary discourse: think about President Obama's emphasis on the importance of empathy for Supreme Court Justices when he was choosing a replacement for Justice David Souter in 2009,[6] or bestsellers such as Leslie Jamison's 2014 essay collection, *The Empathy Exams*. For an amazing merging of the literary and the political, we could look at President Obama's discussion with Marilynne Robinson, published in the fall of 2015 in the *New York Review of Books*. President Obama notes, "the most important stuff I've learned I think I've

learned from novels. It has to do with empathy . . . And the notion that it's possible to connect with some[one] else even though they're very different from you"[7] – words that speak directly to our idea that empathy is both a deep good and that literature, above all, teaches us how to experience it. The importance of being able to understand another's experience seems unquestionable, even though there has been significant debate in literary studies and beyond about whether empathy, and particularly literary empathy, actually leads to altruistic actions – a point I will touch upon further.[8]

As a term, "empathy" is of relatively recent coinage, only entering into English usage in 1909 when the psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener translated the German term *Einfühlung* (in-feeling) into "empathy" in his *Elementary Psychology of Thought Processes. Einfühlung* was itself another new word, presented by Robert Vischer in his 1873 essay "On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics," and then taken up by Theodor Lipps in his discussions of how we can experience aesthetic objects.[9] Chronologically, therefore, empathy developed as a concept alongside literary modernism. Two of the most influential writers to introduce the terms to the British literary world were Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), in essays starting in the late 1890s and culminating in the collection *Beauty and Ugliness* in 1912,[10] and T. E. Hulme, whose 1914 lecture brought German art historian Wilhelm Worringer's theories from the 1908 *Abstraction and Empathy* to the attention of the British modernist avant-garde.[11] Lee has received short shrift for her role for reasons explored recently by the scholar Benjamin Morgan,[12] but her discussion of how empathetic imagining both defines our aesthetic experience and is rooted in the body can illuminate the projects of writers ranging from Hardy to Woolf. Hulme, on the other hand, has been far more respectfully treated both by his contemporaries and by future readers, and his argument (which he acknowledges having essentially transcribed from Worringer's lectures) that empathy was antithetical to abstraction has meant that empathy seemed an *undesirable* force when thinking about many kinds of modernist literary experimentation. Hulme says that abstraction reflects an essential distance between the artist and the world, a "feeling of separation in the face of outside nature," while empathy is the result of a realist mode that "can only occur in a people whose relation to outside nature is such that it admits of this feeling of pleasure and its contemplation."[13] Following critic Megan Marie Hammond's belief that "modernist writers reject *sympathetic* fellow feeling and seek a more radical *empathic* fellow feeling," and that "empathy and abstraction can work together in modernist literature,"[14]

I resist Hulme's vision of empathy and abstraction as always dichotomous and instead argue that the urge to separate and the feeling of separation, which were so central to Hulme's understanding of abstraction, can also be found within the modernist empathetic imagination. My own reading of modernist empathy as often operating within a lyric mode of perception – with a focus on how, as Mutlu Blasing describes it, lyric "enables us to share a 'virtual common subjectivity,' which exists only at the symbolic, thoroughly social, level" – provides one way to think about the abstracting and distancing nature of the empathetic imagination; the sharing of perspectives may always be a virtual act, even when there are attempts to root it in immediate, sensory experience.[15] Yet I do not stop with that effort to reconcile Hulme's oppositions: central to *Modernist Empathy* is the argument that the very structure of modernist empathy is defined by an acute awareness of the "separation in the face of outside nature" that Hulme sees as the urge to abstraction.

While writers such as Keen, Greiner, and Hammond have performed much of the necessary foundational work of excavating the connections and the divergences between empathy and sympathy, I should explicate the definitions and valences, particularly in relation to literary modernism. Although our sense of the distinction between empathy and sympathy is well developed now, "sympathy" was the operative term in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussions of the relationship between subjects; Adam Smith wrote in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) that sympathy involves an imaginative act of perspective-taking – "changing places in fancy with the sufferer" – in such a way that we then can experience some version of the sufferer's experiences.[16] Smith is careful to say that this form of perspective-taking is something that occurs in the realm of the imagination only, and that our experience of sympathy is constituted of "impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy."[17] This definition of sympathy resonates more with our current vision of empathy than it does with how we now conceptualize sympathy. Sympathy became too much of a baggy and inclusive concept by the end of the nineteenth century, and Hammond argues that the "strain" on the idea of sympathy was exacerbated by "the rise of modern psychology, which had to deal with the matter of extracting evidence from other minds" (Hammond, 8). *Einfühlung* or empathy evolved as a term to designate the imaginative sharing that Smith first described, while sympathy came to mean feeling *for*, rather than feeling *with*.

With both of these definitions, the emotional side (a sharing of feelings) of empathy is at the forefront. Indeed the earlier term, sympathy, is now

often defined as an emotion in and of itself (you feel *for* someone, as critic Robert Solomon has helpfully explained).[18] Yet Greiner argues that we need to see sympathy not as a feeling but as a "complex formal process, a mental exercise, not an emotion" (418) in which, Greiner states, the distance between sympathizer and sympathized is maintained, rather than collapsed.[19] Empathy, she argues – and we could also turn to Vischer's 1873 essay, where he used the word *Einfühlung* to describe the process of viewing objects – involves the elision of the distance between self and other (418); it is different from sympathy not because it is more or less about feeling but because it involves a structurally different way of operating. I argue that this idea (and sometimes ideal) of fusion is in fact not realized in empathy in the way that Greiner suggests; indeed, it is precisely those limits on the possibility of fusing that are explored by the writers discussed in *Modernist Empathy*.

Greiner uses her definition to explore sympathy's connection to metonymy and to the realist novel and to connect empathy with the metaphoric and the lyric. Her focus is on analyzing the realist novel, but her comments on empathy resonate with my approach. I argue that we must see empathy as a lyric act, not because it is mainly on display in poetry, but because the lyric is defined by obscuring or highlighting those boundaries between self and other in ways that frighten and challenge our understanding of the limits of subjectivity. One of the recent points of contention in discussions of the lyric emerges in the claim, made most notably by Jonathan Cullers, that we should not read the lyric as presenting persona, as we might in a novel, but instead as engaging in acts of enunciation that do not posit a fictional imitation of actual speech, but that instead "create effects of voicing."[20] We are in the realm of William James's description of the self in his *Psychology: A Briefer Course* (1892), where he claims, "the thoughts themselves are the thinkers."[21] Lyric makes language itself the subject of the text; as Blasing describes it, "The lyric makes audible a virtual subjectivity in the shape of a given language, a mother tongue, and the historical permutations of the concept and status of an 'individual' are not of help in understanding poetic subjectivity."[22] In other words, our desires to embody the voices of lyric into recognizable individual identities is an understandable but often mistaken response; lyric differs from narrative in its ability to move away from the need for a "someone" speaking, and instead toward the idea of speech itself as the subject.[23] The act becomes the actor. While this idea about the "effects of voicing" may seem extreme, if we take this explanation of the lyric as a starting point for thinking not simply about a genre of writing, but as a *mode of perception,*

then we can see how it might begin to open up how to think about empathetic engagement so that we can foreground the possibilities for inhabiting other subjectivities (through voicing them, or attempting to enter into their voice). Concomitantly, such a lyric empathy also suggests the frightening amorphous or polymorphous nature of the very idea of singular subjectivity; if language produces the subject, then the boundaries of subjectivity become linguistically permeable. We may be able both to engage in that critical act of a "momentary suspension of such awareness [of the other's otherness] that sympathy does not allow" (Hammond, 67), and be terrified of the consequences of such a suspension.

This is what I see as the simultaneously radical and frightening aspect of empathy – the experience that modernist writers both embrace and avoid. The moment of suspension of awareness and all the dangers and promises it brings are the focus of my book, as well as why I look at empathy, rather than sympathy, even when the authors themselves do not yet use the term. I argue that it is at pressure points such as this one – the momentary experience when the boundaries of the subject seem permeable – that the modernist empathetic imagination becomes both most fertile and most troubled. And yet I reject Greiner's claim that empathy's elimination of the distance between self and other erases an awareness of alterity. When that instant of fusion occurs, I argue, its unsustainability reinforces, rather than obscures, the sense of the other's difference.

In this way, modernist empathy complicates a critique made in recent years about the ethical *immorality* of empathy. On the one hand, scholars such as Rajini Srikanth have foregrounded the political potential of the imaginative act, writing that "Empathy is a relationally imaginative approach to living that underscores interdependence – whether of individuals, communities, or nations – and has at its foundation the call to imagine our lives always in the context of similar and dissimilar others."[24] Yet Srikanth also acknowledges the complexity of engaging in empathy with those others that are not only different, but reviled – those who may seem more deserving of antipathy than empathy – and this political ambiguity is what scholars ranging from Lauren Berlant to Suzanne Keen have emphasized. Berlant, for example, describes empathy as a "civic-minded but passive ideal" that thwarts the "ethical imperative toward social transformation" because it transforms structural inequity and trauma into private and personal affect, thereby redirecting anger and action into the realm of feeling.[25] Keen, in examining the arguments of various critics of empathy-derived altruism, similarly contends that there is a tenuous link between empathy and action: "empathetic reading

experiences that confirm the empathy-altruism theory, I argue, are exceptional, not routine" (65).

Yet this is where, I argue, modernist empathy can offer an alternative way of thinking about the ethics of empathy: in its insistence on the dangerous nature of empathetic identification *and* on the way that it might reveal the fissures in the façade of the singular self, modernist empathy allows us to understand empathy as neither altruistic nor simply self-soothing, but self-altering in sometimes surprising ways. Berlant, in talking about the perils and the potential of sentimental literature, makes a claim that applies to modernist empathy as well: "the possibility that through the identification with alterity you will never be the same remains the radical threat and the great promise of this affective aesthetic."[26] That vibrating space between threat and promise is the site of the modernist empathetic imagination that I will be probing here.

Modernist Empathy

While the quotation from Proust that opened this chapter might suggest that modernist literature and questions of empathy have deep and self-evident links, we do not normally think of empathy when we first encounter a high-modernist text, whether we come to it through the rhythmic cadences of Virginia Woolf's prose or the aural acrobatics of T. S. Eliot's early poetry; dissociation and alienation are terms that are more likely to come up in both criticism and classroom discussion. If you love to read, likely there is a formative moment (or many such moments) in your past when you have fallen so deeply into a book that you cringe when Dorothea Brookes decides to marry Mr. Casaubon, you weep when Beth dies in *Little Women*, and you exult when Esther is finally revealed as an heiress in *Bleak House*. Yet moments like these are harder to come by in books and poetry such as Thomas Hardy's surreal elegies for his dead wife, Woolf's *Jacob's Room* with its inaccessible protagonist, Eliot's polyphonous *The Waste Land*, Ford Madox Ford's fragmented and massive war tetralogy, *Parade's End*, or Mary Borden's lyrical *The Forbidden Zone;* the characters and voices are either too much or too little embodied, are overly flattened, or are entwined in a sea of styles, voices, and references. In fact, perhaps part of what makes literature like that so "hard" is the way that the writing forces us to work in order to understand the characters and, so often, then seems itself to work *against* allowing any understanding to emerge. While the same might be said for poetry more broadly – aside from some narrative poems and the occasional dramatic monologue – it is even more apparent

in modernist poetry, which may be why scholars interested in empathy have generally avoided it.

I have chosen extreme examples on both sides in the instances above – those characters and texts that seem to advertise the possibility of empathetic engagement with characters versus those that startle and alienate. I have also deliberately periodized my examples; the group that invites us to empathize with the characters is all taken from the nineteenth-century canon; the group that does not is from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "modernist" period. While these short lists are necessarily reductive, I do want to argue that there is a particular version of nineteenth-century fiction and empathy that colors the literary-historical lens through which we might theorize empathy; as Vincent Sherry argues, from Romanticism through the nineteenth century, "a primary goal for poet and reader is to achieve union with the aesthetic object."[27] This lens is not only focused on the Victorian period, but it is also deeply embedded in a theory of *narrative*, not poetic, empathy. Since Suzanne Keen's 2006 article on "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" (which she expanded upon in her 2007 book on *Empathy and the Novel*), empathy studies have resided in the domain of narrative theory (and often within the realm of Victorian studies).[28] As the titles of Keen's article and book suggest, she is primarily interested in theorizing empathy in relation to fiction and other narrative forms; this interest is both logical and useful because it focuses our attention on the kinds of interpersonal empathy at work. The narrative-theory approach to empathy foregrounds, first, intratextual acts of empathy between characters (we see the characters experiencing the perspective of another character), and, second, the extratextual act involving the reader's ability to empathize with characters.

It is no surprise that we see this interpersonal empathetic imagination, whether originating from within or without the text, aligned with the project of Victorian fiction; as Keen notes, "the reinvention of the novel as a form that might do something positive in the world by swaying readers' minds rather than activating their passions we may also date to the Victorian period" (*Empathy and the Novel*, 38). In other words, Victorian writers were acutely interested in how acts of empathetic engagement might both be represented and be enacted. Relevant to my book and the question that it raises about the effects and purposes of literary empathy is Rebecca Mitchell's argument that Victorian fiction insists upon the essential difference and distance between individuals and promotes empathy despite this inherent distance between subjects. She writes that we see the characters in realist novels making the same mistake that we do in our own

lives; they think that they can know one another fully, which is what often leads to some of their most egregious errors in judgment. The readers, on the other hand, make a different sort of error. While Victorian novels "insist on the distinction – in both form and content – between that unknowability of the person and the knowability of art," the reader tends to confound these realms and to think that people, not just books, are knowable.[29] Mitchell argues that realist novels work to underline and emphasize the difference, and thereby allow for the possibility of an ethical engagement with another. Critic Mary-Catherine Harrison goes even further, positing that realism "emerged in an attempt to alter the very reality that it represents, a literary 'intervention' in the actual world."[30] The social action project of realist fiction raised the stakes of both creating characters with whom readers could empathize and showing characters who could model acts of perspective-taking. As Caroline Levine describes it, "realist writers developed techniques of omniscient narration: narrative perspectives not lodged in any single consciousness but able to move in and out of multiple spaces and minds and to present connections among people which they themselves might not be aware of."[31] The formal techniques of realist narrative blend with what Frederic Jameson calls its "epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth)"; indeed, he writes, this claim is what "masquerades as an aesthetic ideal."[32] The apparent transparency of "omniscient" realist narration, which suggests the possibility of understanding multiple perspectives, is both a formal and a philosophical stance; Victorian realism is created by and creates an idea of the world as potentially known or knowable, even as it acknowledges the alterity that is behind any act of thinking through another's perspective.

While empathy (as an act or an experience) may seem to have an easy connection to omniscience (as a literary technique or mode), this is an assumption that a turn to modernist literature allows us to probe. While empathy is often compared to experiences of omniscience, it does very different work if it depends on and highlights alterity. Nicholas Royle has argued for a sociohistorical basis to the waning of the omniscient narrative as we move into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; he points to the concomitant waning of Christian religious belief. Omniscience from its initial uses in narrative was "a definition based on the presumed analogy between the novelist as creator and the Creator of the cosmos, an omniscient God."[33] With the validity of belief in the all-knowing Christian God foundering, the possibility of omniscience likewise loses its steady foundation; conceptualizing omniscience is more challenging if we reject the idea of an omniscient creator.[34] For his part, Royle argues that we should think