Sentimental Realism:
Poverty and the Ethics of Empathy, 1832-1867

by

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To my mother,
who taught me
the power of reading.
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Abstract

“Sentimental Realism: Poverty and the Ethics of Empathy, 1832-1867” reassesses Victorian social problem literature in light of emerging research on the social and ethical function of reading. In the years between the first two Reform bills, influential authors and artists including Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Caroline Norton, Thomas Hood, and Richard Redgrave documented and imagined poverty for a largely middle- and upper-class audience. Integrating characteristic elements of sentimentalism and realism, the texts they produced were predicated on the assumption that narratives can change the attitudes and beliefs of individual readers and the social and political policies of a nation. Modern criticism has typically dismissed these objectives as naïvely optimistic, but new research in psychology and cognitive science confirms that narrative texts have a significant impact on readers’ “real-world” beliefs and behaviors. Bringing this interdisciplinary research to bear on my own readings of canonical and non-canonical literature and visual arts, I argue that sentimental realism used strategies of narrative empathy to reshape Victorian class relationships. My organizing principle highlights the relationship between narrative empathy and form: Chapter 1 examines philosophical and psychological research on empathy and argues that empathy itself is a formal relationship based on metaphor—“I am you.” Chapter 2 explores the relationship between empathy and point of view and proposes that the use of narrative perspective instructs readers in the psychological mobility of cross-class empathy. Chapter 3 investigates narratives’ generic focus on character and argues that this “personification” of poverty gave
emotional and ethical force to an otherwise abstract or quantified social issue. Chapter 4 argues that proliferating “metaphors of realism” creates a synchdocal interpretation of character that extends beyond the boundaries of a fictional world. Chapter 5 considers apostrophe as a rhetorical strategy designed to mobilize social disparities between audience and subject, redefining English national identity in terms of ethical obligation and empathetic imagination. Integrating this formalist analysis with a scientific account of the long-term effects of reading, “Sentimental Realism” constructs an ethical theory of narrative empathy that contributes to our broader understanding of how readers understand and interact with narrative texts.