Borrowed Selves, Possible Futures: Literature as Enactive Scaffold in Depression

In line with 4E cognition, psychopathology may be construed as dynamical "stuckness" across bodily, affective, cognitive, social, narrative, and normative dimensions witch may be stabilized by socio-cultural scaffolds and master narratives (Gallagher, 2024; Kirmayer et al., 2025).

On this basis, literature can be understood as enactive scaffolding. Reading is a dynamic experience that recruits embodied, re-enactive capacities: the reader's consciousness can temporarily take the shape of a fictional perspective while remaining buffered by fiction's "double vision" (Bernaerts et al., 2013; Schneider, 2021; Polvinen, 2018). The text's formal features, from linguistic micro-structure to narrative architecture, constitute an affordance space that enables safe exploration of emotions, agency, and self-other relations (Bundgaard & Stjernfelt, 2015).

I develop this proposal through addressing temporality in depression. Major depression involves "temporal stuckness" and an *idem–ipse* crisis: over-identification with a fixed past (idem) and erosion of future-directed selfhood (ipse) (Mancini et al., 2024; Ratcliffe, 2025). Fiction can counter this via three mechanisms: (i) temporal depth produced by foreground–background structures of narrative time (Bundgaard & Stjernfelt, 2015); (ii) past-as-future effects created by temporal displacement, where the past unfolds with renewed indeterminacy (Popova, 2014; Ratcliffe, 2025); and (iii) agency-through-distance, as narrative perspective separates the narrating "I" from the narrated "me," permitting controlled re-authoring rather than compulsive rumination (Gallagher, 2024; Garratt, 2016).