

NOVEL CHARACTERS

A Genealogy

Maria DiBattista

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Preface

Fictional characters don't exist, but we often feel as if they did. Or wish that they didn't. Mr Darcy can still make young women's hearts flutter in the age of Twitter. Charlotte Brontë, alarmed by the ferocity of Heathcliff, wondered if it was even right that her sister, Emily, had conceived of him. In the "Kugelmass Episode," Woody Allen fantasizes about a weekend at the Plaza Hotel with Madame Bovary. Different readers of varying degrees of sophistication, but all very much alike in their subjection to the power of novelistic characters to enthrall. Their responses are as representative as they are instructive: although we know them to be imaginary, novelistic characters can be as real to us as the book (or Kindle) we hold in our hand. We become involved with them, identify with them, love or despise, even fear them, care what happens to them.

Why this should be so is one of the deepest mysteries and pleasures of the imaginative but intensely real experience available to us in novels. E. M. Forster alludes to this feeling of intense involvement in the title of the two chapters he devotes to character in his "ramshackly" but sharply observed *Aspects of the Novel* – "People," a word that works to reduce and in some measure demystify the distance between readers and novelistic characters. Regarded as people, characters are more

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likely to appear as familiars of our world and in fact play an important part in our experience of it. Forster is careful to distinguish our interest in “people” from our interest in story. Stories, he famously observed, pique our curiosity about what happens next. Characters open up a new source of mental incitement that appeals, Forster insists, “to our intelligence and imagination not just our curiosity.” That is because, Forster explains, with people, “a new emphasis enters [the novelist’s] voice; emphasis on value.”¹

Novel Characters is a study of this “new emphasis” on the distinctness and value of novelistic “people” as they are in themselves and as they appear to others. My title entails an obvious, but I hope not egregious, pun, one meant to highlight the relation between what is “new” in the novel’s emphasis on people and what is intrinsically or generically “novel” about the particular forms it invents to accommodate them. These forms are verbal and conceptual as well as formal and structural: the novel conceives of character in a way unique to itself; the story it tells is meant to bring its characters into high relief so that they can be seen for the singular beings they are. They appear to us as “vivid” characters as opposed to inert marks on a page. It is their vividness that gives a “new emphasis” and incomparable value to the stories told about and through them.

As the emphasis changes, so do the values, a simple fact, but one that seldom colors or otherwise affects the way we generally think about novelistic character. This is a fact registered in my subtitle, *A Genealogy*, which asserts that a novelistic character may boast of its own particular pedigree, that its formations are not dictated solely by social and historical forces, but are determined by inner necessities, among which the most powerful is the necessity to become distinctly oneself. Genealogy is one of the primary ways we understand the genesis and evolution of people, and also of our *ideas* about people and their simultaneously distinct and malleable characters. Yet despite the revived interest in the novel’s representations of identity, emotions, the passions, and the moral as well as social and political sentiments, what a character *is* and what character may and should become is still very much a story left mainly to tell itself. Even the recent return to ethics in literary criticism, aimed at revitalizing the

postmodernist assault on individual agency and autonomy, has focused more on the value of the novel as a form of moral instruction or as an instrument of social reform than on its representations of singular moral beings. Of character in itself, literary criticism of the present day has surprisingly little new or specific to say.

Novel Characters aims to redress this critical neglect. My claim is that the novel is the literary form best suited to create characters of real, often troubling distinction, and that indeed it has a generic disposition, amounting to an obligation, to do so. Novels are narratives that represent characters with a particular set of interests and moral outlook – a point of view, in novelistic terms – that may or may not align with our own. Unlike the epic and romance, the novel is concerned to show us not only the exceptional, but also the everyday, the feeble, or the stunted as well as the heroic manifestations of character. This is why the novel often attends to characters conventionally regarded as failures or of no particular interest. The novel is as interested in them as it is in those persons who immediately arouse our anxiety and curiosity – namely, the adventurous, the charismatic, the inordinately beautiful, the refined, the rambunctious, the intelligent, the insane. It never tires of recounting the countless difficulties that characters encounter in realizing or staying “in character,” challenges and obstacles that will vary according to time, place, social class, economic status, race or ethnicity, and gender.

In his engaging essay “The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes” Milan Kundera suggests how we might begin to organize such a history according to the logic and formal shapes the novel itself “discovered” as it set out to explore “the various dimensions of existence one by one” (that is, one character at a time as well as one novel at a time):

In its own way, through its own logic, the novel discovered the various dimensions of existence one by one: with Cervantes and his contemporaries, it inquires into the nature of adventure; with Richardson, it begins to examine “what happens inside,” to unmask the secret life of the feelings; with Balzac, it discovers man’s rootedness in history; with

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Flaubert, it explores the *terra* previously *incognita* of the everyday; with Tolstoy, it focuses on the intrusion of the irrational in human behavior and decisions. It probes time: the elusive past with Proust, the elusive present with Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it examines the role of the myths from the remote past that control our present actions. Et cetera, et cetera.²

Novel Characters, happily elaborating on the rich novelistic materials encompassed but left unspecified by Kundera's "et cetera," will accordingly proceed chronologically from the "birth of the novel" in *Don Quixote* and its European descendents to its great efflorescence in the canonical works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century, particularly British, fiction. It will conclude by considering today's most imaginative and influential cosmopolitan fictions, novels that reflect in new idioms the novel's enduring preoccupation with creating characters that might live outside as well as within their pages.

But first, a few advisories about my own avid, alternately bemused and beguiled, and undeniably partisan interest in novelistic character as it manifests itself over time:

1. I believe, most importantly, that there is such a thing as novelistic character, a claim many will dispute. I understand such skepticism, but don't share it and indeed remain fundamentally unbothered and certainly undeterred by it. I appreciate that these "novel characters" exist in another dimension, one that can only be reached through the words that call them into being, describe their physical appearance, delineate their moral traits, report their social habits, recount the most mundane along with the most consequential of their actions, transcribe their inner feelings and thoughts. Since we know of their existence through the words that bring them to our notice and that, indeed, give them whatever life they can be said to possess, we need to attend to how they are written about. So in the pages that follow, my genealogy of novelistic character is constructed and inspired by certain recurrent "keywords," in the double sense that Raymond Williams uses and recommends this term: as "significant, binding words in

certain activities" and as "significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought."³ The terms I propose to guide my genealogical inquiry into character – Originals, Individuals, Selves, Identities, Native Cosmopolitans – were chosen with this double signification in mind: they are words that direct our attention to the intrinsic ways the novel conceives of and defines its characters, that is, to the related, but distinctive ways the novel thinks about character and how it acts upon those notions in creating and representing them. These particular words also reflect the novel's quasi-mathematical concern with Character as Entities that find their most complete expression in the Whole Person, their most distressed but also multivalent form in the fragmented Self and split-hyphenated Identity, and their most contemporary embodiment in the compromise formations of the Compound Identity. They are terms that define characters as belonging to what we might call a specific character type or genus – from the highest and foundational order (i.e. Wholes) of Originals, to the self-directed and self-dependent class of Individuals, to the modern ranks of those characters constituted of many Selves (i.e. Fractions) or endowed, often burdened and afflicted, with a socially conspicuous Identity, to the new social manifestations of character (i.e. Compounds) that I will call Native Cosmopolitans.

2. To ensure that the characters before me appear as vivid to you as they do to me, I will sometimes deliberately revert to a more archaic typographical style and capitalize certain words I want to call attention to. These are words that may have lost some of their signifying capacity, most obviously the words that denote the *intrinsic disposition, defining trait, or determining circumstances* that define, in different degrees and with various levels of success, the life of novelistic characters. In the current conventions of academic writing, only the word *Other* is routinely treated with this kind of typographical respect. I want to accord to character a similar respect and reintroduce, if only stylistically and typographically, the notion of *Emphatic response*, one that insists that Character may not be, as Novalis proclaimed, Fate, but it is *Fateful* for our reading of novels.

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3. In writing this book I came to understand that my own character as an emphatic reader of novelistic people is distinctly American. Throughout you will note my particular debt to Emersonian notions of character – that character is Force, that it is centrality, that it wants room – notions that represent and respect character as an Originating Power, as a self-counseled individuality, as a persistent (even if dreadful or lamentable) self, as a chosen rather than imposed Identity, as a Native rather than alienated Being. You will note, too, that none of the characters I discuss, even those as Original as Don Quixote or Robinson Crusoe, achieve these Ultimate forms of character. This is because I will be talking about how characters are conceived and represented in novels, not as they are portrayed in epic or romance narratives, fictions in which human life is magnified to heroic proportions and even spiritual failings have a grandeur and a consequence rarely glimpsed, much less attained in ordinary life. Novels are of this world, although the best ones persist in looking and thinking beyond it. We don't read them to encounter perfect specimens, but to learn about human, if imaginary, beings – people, to use Forster's more idiomatic term – with all their faults as well as their unique claims to moral and personal distinction.

Whether there even is such a thing as novelistic character is a question that will bedevil us throughout this book, but for now let us proceed as if there is and that it is not simply a product of social and ideological conditioning or the phantom presence evoked by words on a page, but an imaginative, yet very real expression of the genius of our species for differentiating itself into highly distinct forms.

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Princeton University
May 2010

Endnotes

- 1 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1954), p. 43.
- 2 Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), p. 8.
- 3 Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 15.

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Introduction: Novel Characters

Emerson thought that character was nature in the highest form.¹ He is thinking here of character as virtually a synonym for Genius, but even so, this is a compliment to human nature that few would second without qualification. The standard might strike us as too high, even out of reach, especially when applied to the characters that populate the novel, a genre dedicated to giving us realistic, rather than idealized depictions of human beings. It would hardly take a moment's thought to identify the variety of morally objectionable characters who are so much at home in the novel: weak and bad characters, for one, and then all variety of those sneaky, weasely, or weedy characters who plague and exasperate us. The name and number of human nature in its lowest form are, distressingly, legion. There is a history for approaching character in these less exalted and often standardized forms, but while acknowledging this history, it is my intention to write against it in an Emersonian vein of exhortation, urging us to seek out not what is standard but what is original, not what is typical, but what is exceptional, not what is predictable, but what is surprising,

bewildering, potentially alarming, and ultimately transformative about the way the novel conceives of character.

The literary notion of character has long associated itself with ideas of distinction, although not always of the most favorable kind. The known history of "character writing" begins with Theophrastus, whose *Characters* was the first systematic attempt to describe distinct types of character – thirty in the version that has come down to us – identified by "the mode in which they administer their affairs."² Although a preface, which was once believed to have been written by Theophrastus, claims he arrived at these character types by observing, "side by side, with great closeness, both the good and the worthless among men," none of the good men, who presumably would give us examples of nature in its highest form, find a place in his account. *Characters* begins by depicting the "doublings and retractions" of the Ironical man and concludes with the stinting ways of the Avaricious Man. They are the first and last exhibit in a rogues' gallery depicting a morally instructive, often comical array of conniving, insincere, ill-behaved, and self-interested characters, all of them prototypes of a specific and generally obnoxious trait.

Thus, for example, Theophrastus describes the characteristic manners of the flatterer, the garrulous man, the chatty man, the boaster, the gossip (or fabricator), the evil-speaker (or slanderer), and the gross man (known for his "obtrusive and objectionable pleasantry") so that we might know them and know, too, the differences between the man who is merely chatty, the man intent on fabricating stories about others, and the man who enjoys slandering others. Similarly, he records the extravagances of the shameless man, the reckless man, the boaster; the misplaced self-regard of the arrogant man, the mean man, and the complacent man; the cramped and stunted nature of the penurious man, the unreasonable man, the surly man, the grumbler, the unpleasant man, and the offensive man (the last two cousins but not twins); the presumptions of the distrustful man and the late-learner; the power-mongering of the officious man, the man of mean ambitions, the oligarch, and the patron of rascals ("philoponeria," literally, the lover of bad company); and the mental and moral weaknesses of the stupid man, the superstitious man, the coward.

The “character as genre” invented by Theophrastus inclines, then, to satire, delineating characters exclusively in terms of their public face, which more or less is presumed to reflect – a “more or less” that will come back to haunt us – their inner and most consistent disposition. The satiric bite of his sketches is in keeping with the meaning of the Greek word, character, an engraved mark, derived from *kharas*, the stylus or sharp-pointed implement for writing on clay or wax tablets. Character in this double sense refers to what etches and is etched, what makes the mark and the graphic mark (hieroglyph or letter) itself. This etymology is morally as well as technically suggestive. The stylus makes distinctive marks through a steady application of force; so, too, character is fashioned by those pressuring forces that shape, condition, and keep character *in* character. Dickens seizes on the psychological as well as dramatic possibilities of this double and uncanny sense of character in *Great Expectations*, a novel, as we shall see, haunted by various inscriptions and turns of character. Character is literally reduced to a graphic sign when Pip’s sister, unable to speak after being brutally assaulted, tries to communicate a felt and urgent want by tracing “a character that looked like a curious T.” In a frenzy of decoding, Pip produces “everything producible that began with T, from tar to toast and tub”³ until, with the help of Biddy, he suddenly realizes that the scrawled T is not a letter, but the pictogram of a hammer. Once the “character” of the sign is deciphered, it becomes clear who is meant: Orlick, instantly identifiable by his tools and characteristic activity at the forge. Dickens’s play on these older meanings of character as letter, mark, and expressive tool prepares for the darker and less easily solvable mystery of Orlick’s character – who he is and what he is when he is not at work, when his characteristic hammering takes a violently personal form.

The Greeks had another word that recognized and denoted character in its habitual dispositions and as an ensemble of moral traits: the word *ethos* (a cognate of the word *idiom*, which indicates the particularity not of persons but of their language). This is the word that Aristotle uses when he speaks of tragic character in the *Poetics*. It is a word that has descended to us and is still in use today to refer to the marked traits, customs, sentiments, or beliefs that define a person,