Postmodern Studies 4

Postmodern Characters

A Study of Characterization in British and American Postmodern Fiction

Aleid Fokkema

Rodopi

Amsterdam - Atlanta, GA 1991

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Series
edited by
Theo D'haen
and
Hans Bertens

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To my parents

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

The first three volumes in the present series gathered articles on, respectively, *Postmodern Fiction in Europe and the Americas* (Postmodern Studies 1, 1988), *(Dis)continuities: Essays on Paul de Man* (Postmodern Studies 2, 1989), and *History and Post-War Writing* (Postmodern studies 3, 1990). Contributions to these three volumes came from scholars around the world: Israel (Brian McHale), Canada (Wladimir Krysinski), the United states (Stanley Corngold, Cyrus Hamlyn, Julio Ortega, Robert von Hallberg, Alan Thiher and many others), Norway (Arild Linneberg and Geir Mork), Belgium (Geert Lernhout, Ortwin de Graef), Holland, (Richard Todd, A. Kibedi Varga), Australia (Simon During, David Bennett), and England (Abigail Lee Six). Postmodern Studies 4 was to have focussed on "Postmodernism and Women Writing"; unfortunately there has been some delay in getting this volume together. Instead, we are now offering as volume 4 in the series a monograph on "Postmodern Characters" by a younger Dutch scholar.

Starting from a number of different approaches to "character," Aleid Fokkema tries to establish the conventions of characterization in a range of British and American novels that have commonly been categorized as postmodern: Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, D.H. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, and Thomas Pynchon's *V*. We are convinced that hers is an important contribution to the scholarly debate on postmodernism.

Theo D'HAEN (Leiden University)
Hans BERTENS (University of Utrecht)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Although I disagree with some of the extreme poststructuralist positions that have coloured the debate on postmodern fiction, I firmly adhere to the view that no text originates entirely from a single author. Had I needed any proof, then the conditions that have led to the final shape of this study would have been sufficient. A heterogeneous lot of published scholarly discourses has found a way into this text, but that is not really the point here. This book also reflects the many stimulating discussions I had with friends and colleagues on postmodernism, semiotics, the nature of fiction and even the ups and downs of academic research. I am grateful to all but wish to thank a few in particular here. Professor Hans Bertens, whose expertise of postmodern fiction has been invaluable, was calm and helpful where necessary. Immensely receptive to my wild excursions into the field of semiotics, he always proved an astute judge of the different possibilities I laid out to him. Barend van Heusden read an early version of part one. His informed remarks helped clarifying my still confused views. Professor Willem Bronzwaer's comments on the very first version of Chapter 2 set me on the right track. Professor Douwe Fokkema has read the manuscript twice: as a scholar and a father. I would also like to thank Dr. Maureen Peeck-O' Toole and Sharon Ouditt for the laborious task of commenting on the style and grammar of the manuscript. Winfrid de Munck helped in the final formatting stages.

Ricardo Teijeiro provided the necessary material and spiritual catering. He also showed me how to switch off the word processor.

PART I

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Nice Work*, David Lodge's rewriting of the nineteenth century Industrial novel, the female protagonist is a left-wing feminist academic who lectures in English literature and is thoroughly versed in poststructuralism. She is, writes the narrator, "a character who, rather awkwardly for me, doesn't herself believe in the concept of character" (1988: 39). In what is both an evocation and a parody of the latest critical developments, the narrator gives his character's reasons for dismissing the concept of character in literature: it is a bourgeois myth, as there is not really any 'self,' no "finite, unique soul or essence that constitutes a person's identity [but] only a subject position in an infinite web of discourses" (40). Selves are enacted in language, and there is nothing outside the text. Fiction has always offered the illusion of the unified, autonomous subject, but that myth is now deconstructed, our lecturer in English argues, by the modernist and postmodernist novel. The arguments against 'character' notwithstanding, the narrator decides to ignore his protagonist's views, as she has ordinary feelings like everyone else. He will treat her as a character.

Here we have in a nutshell the problematic status of character in postmodern fiction. Critics seem to agree that 'character' is outdated, that the postmodern novel demonstrates that there are only fragile subject positions, that language is the only constituent of 'self,' and that multiplicity (of identity, of selves, of subjectivities) has superseded the unified, coherent, 'old stable ego' that was already denounced by D.H. Lawrence in 1914 (Huxley 1932: 198). Those who adhere to this view have no time for such critical terms as 'character,' 'agent,' 'protagonist,' or 'heroine.' The only term that is admitted is the one that allows for the constitutive role of language or discourse: the subject. When Linda Hutcheon, for instance, writes at length about character in two postmodern novels, the title of that chapter is the confusing "Subject in/of/to History and his Story" (1988: 158). Poststructuralist concepts are applied to the postmodern novel, and as a result the idea of a subject which is the product of discourse is the only one which seems pertinent to an analysis of postmodern fiction.

On the other hand, however, the concept of 'character' as a critical term is persistent. It is not only the narrator of *Nice Work* who decides to ignore poststructuralism. Some postmodern authors, too, have said that perhaps their characterization was rather unconventional, but that they did not intend to do away with the concept altogether. Besides,

postmodern novels were written in the USA long before poststructuralism became a trend, and consequently the earlier criticism of these novels did not conceptualize characters as subject positions. What those early critics would say, however, was that Pynchon or Burroughs or Barthelme produced 'flat' characters, or that the characters in their novels or stories were 'badly' characterized, and therefore lacked representational qualities.

The aim of this study is to establish the conventions of characterization in a range of different postmodern novels. Whether a fragile subject in language or a cardboard cut-out, however, 'character' in postmodern fiction is a problematic concept. One is faced with the difficulty of dealing with an element of fiction that has come under great pressure, as postmodern fiction appears to subvert some of the most commonly accepted and widespread notions about character. If postmodern character is construed exclusively as a subject in discourse, then one cannot preserve any of the qualities that have been traditionally attributed to character. If, however, one chooses to retain the traditional concept of character, then established concepts about representation or 'flat' and 'round' characters will simply define many postmodern characters as failed or flawed, and dismiss them as objects of interest. In order, therefore, to break the deadlock between the poststructuralist position and a more traditional one, an altogether different analytical model is called for. Part of this study, then, is devoted to formulating a model of character that permits a detailed and comparative examination of characters in various postmodern texts.

But this study on character in postmodern fiction does not aim to offer a new definition of postmodernism in literature. In the 1980s, a number of critical studies considered a wide range of postmodern texts in order to formulate the main characteristics of postmodern literature. French, Italian, Hispanic, German, Austrian, English, and American novels were discussed by critics who argued that postmodernism was characterized by the 'ontological dominant' (fiction that problematizes "the ontology of the literary text itself or ... the ontology of the world it projects" [McHale 1987: 10]), or by its use of 'metafiction,' ("fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relation between fiction and reality" [Waugh 1984: 2]), or by its status as 'historiographic metafiction' (the "*engagé*, problematically referential" text that "is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality" [Hutcheon 1988: 52, 40]). The concept of postmodernism, as the cited definitions may illustrate (and there are more of these), is neither fixed nor unified (cf. Bertens 1986, Calinescu 1987). Any single definition necessarily excludes works from the canon

that other critics definitely include: Brian McHale, for instance, sees a canonical text such as Thomas Pynchon's *V.* as 'limit-modernist' rather than postmodernist (1987: 21-2). Linda Hutcheon, however, regards *V.* as one of the many examples of postmodern parody (1988: 40, 130-1), but does not admit the surfictionists Federman, Sorrentino, or Suckenick, who are prominent in McHale's book. So rather than offering further delineations and refinements, my concern here is to investigate the claims about postmodern character that have been made so far.

I have chosen to work with the two key-concepts of "intertextuality" and "plurality". It is fair to say that these concepts are prominent in virtually all critical attempts to come to terms with postmodernism. Texts belonging to the postmodern canon display a firm distrust of origins, of the single, unique text, or of the strictly referential function of language. They may also foreground the plurality of worlds. I will use these two concepts as a way of arriving at a postmodernism of the highest common factor.

If postmodernism is not to be newly defined here, it follows that only 'canonical' postmodern texts can be discussed. The idea of a canon may be inimical to postmodernism, but one has nevertheless emerged over the years. My study will cover some of its constituents. In contradistinction to the seemingly exhaustive studies of Hutcheon, McHale, et al., which tend to sweep national and cultural differences under the carpet in the construction of a cosmopolitan (if not global) postmodernism, I have limited this study to an in-depth analysis of some ten novels. National and cultural differences will be allowed full play in a discussion that concentrates on postmodern fiction from the United States and Britain. Although readers will notice a change from the centre of the postmodern experiment which was at its liveliest in the 1960s and 1970s in the States, to the British practice which started to flourish in the 1980s, the novels discussed have all been called 'postmodern.' In order to do justice to the different constructions of postmodernism, then, the novels that have been selected are widely different in nature. Both such highly self-reflexive texts as Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* (1979) or the almost forgotten *Speedboat* (Adler 1976), and more seemingly referential texts such as *The Satanic Verses* (Rushdie 1988), *Hawksmoor* (Ackroyd 1985), or *Lanark* (Gray 1982) form a part of my discussion. Other novels, such as in *The Public Burning* (Coover 1977), *The White Hotel* (Thomas 1981), or Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), address poststructuralist views on language, history and the subject. Finally, the topic of the absence of origins will be discussed with reference to Pynchon's *V.* (1963).

It may appear that such controversial concepts as 'mimesis,' 'reference,' or 'representation,' are used self-evidently in this study. Representation, it is true, has been problematized by poststructuralist criticism. But when poststructuralists deny that fiction can refer to the world (or the 'external world' [Butler 1984: 53]), they tend to support their argument by reducing 'reference' or 'mimesis' to a kind of naive, self-evident notion that supposes a one-to-one relation between signs and the world. There are, however, ways of negotiating representation which are both more fruitful and less naive, which will be explored more fully in the final chapter. For the main part of the book, a common-sense meaning will be attributed to 'representation,' in order to retain something of the shock that postmodernism initially caused. To represent, then, can be defined as 'resembling life or reality within a specific set of conventions that are accepted as natural by a community of readers.'

Another point that needs some clarifying is the use of semiotics in this study. For an analytical model of character which is neither traditional nor caught up in poststructuralist discourse I have turned to a theory of sign-systems which is heavily indebted to the work of Umberto Eco. Let me emphasize that semiotics will not be used to endorse the misguided belief in fixed, if not universal, structures in a text that are unproblematically retrieved by the reader, no matter which historical context engendered that text (or that reader). Rather, I am assuming that the interpretation of signs is necessarily dependent on context, and therefore neither complete nor unique. I conceive of semiotics as a general theory of signs and sign production, a theory concerned with how people use signs to think, experience, communicate, or teach. To interpret such signs then is part and parcel of the semiotic project. To deny that we interpret when we are 'doing' semiotics is not only counterintuitive, it is also misguided: any handling of the text that surpasses merely experiencing or describing that text is dependent on the attribution of meaning. The type of meticulous analysis that must be the basis of a semiotic approach in order to build up an interpretative argument may rule out the popular notion that texts have an infinite set of meanings (a notion thoroughly refuted by Barnes [1988: 86-105]), but certainly does not limit the number of possible meanings to one. So the semiotic analysis that is practiced here should be understood to occupy a middle ground between free-for-all critical ingenuity (Barnes 1988: 99) and a claim that there are rigid structures 'in' the text. The activity of interpretation that accompanies my semiotic analysis is fully acknowledged.

The study is divided into two main parts. The first part establishes a model for critical analysis of character and the specific innovations of characterization that are to be expected in the postmodern novel. Chapter 2 will address the traditional approach to character as pioneered by Henry James and E.M. Forster. I will argue that the introduction of the distinction between 'flat' and 'round' characters has served evaluation rather than critical analysis, and that a strictly mimetic reading of character appears to exclude the study of conventions of characterization. It may be necessary to relinquish a representational approach to character, although, as I will argue in Chapter 3, many structuralist theories, though downright non-representational, are not satisfactory either. It does seem fruitful, however, to consider character as a cumulative sign. A proposal for such a semiotic approach to character in literature will be further developed in Chapter 4. A review of the critical discussion on postmodern character in Chapter 5 will demonstrate that there is by no means a coherent view on its nature. This, in turn, will lead to formulating some specific questions in Chapter 6 which will guide the semiotic analysis in Part Two. Chapters 7-11 are devoted to the practice of analysis, whereas in the concluding Chapter 12 I will review the readings of postmodern character that have emerged.

2. THE TRADITION: CHARACTER AS A HUMAN BEING

In a recent collection of essays, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, well-known critics write lucidly and with conviction on 'gender,' 'race,' 'author,' 'writing,' or 'structure' (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 1990). Readers who wish to update their knowledge of less fashionable terms, however, will open this book in vain. In the Introduction, McLaughlin apologizes for the omission of discussions of 'plot,' 'point of view,' or 'character' with the rather lame excuse of limited space (1990: 5). He urges the critical community to think these terms through, however, "in order to make sense of the assumptions they bring into play" (5). This is a revealing statement. McLaughlin's unease with traditional terms which nevertheless cannot be replaced or ignored is significant for the state of the art in literary criticism.[1] The old terms are not superseded by new ones, but have not undergone the kind of sophisticated revision that would have kept them more in tune with the developments of present-day literary criticism. This is especially true in the case of 'character.'

Traditionally, 'character' is a term that both nourishes and feeds on approaches to literature which operate on mimetic premises. With the rise of postmodern literature and deconstructive criticism, conventional representation has come under pressure, but for a long time nothing seemed more natural than to take it for granted that characters represented human beings, that novels were about people, and that psychological motives sustained plots. This traditional view of character is still widespread. Baruch Hochman, for instance, writes in a recent study on character that "characters in literature have more in common with people in life than contemporary discourse suggests" (1985: 7). However, such a traditional concept of character is not only inadequate in the face of postmodern literature, but in the face of practically any literary text, because representation is understood to be a natural process rather than a matter of literary conventions.

[1] This example of unease with the notion of character does not stand alone: in J.A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, a vast book of 745 pages, 'character' does not have an entry either. Only 'the character' as a literary genre is discussed (1977: 109-111). Neither do alternative terms, such as 'actor,' 'agent,' 'figure,' or 'person' have an entry.

The art of representation

Henry James, no minor contributor to theories of character, wrote passionately in the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* that representation was his "irrepressible ideal" in writing fiction (1984a: 1322). He frequently turns to the metaphor of painting to underscore his point, thereby distinguishing his idea of representation from the photograph, a mere copy of reality. Rather, he sees himself, the author, as mediating and interpreting reality. His characters have a basis in life, he insists, but are not mere copies of human beings: "the affair of the painter is not the immediate, it is the reflected field of life, the realm not of application, but of appreciation.... My report of people's experience ... is essentially my appreciation of it" (1984a: 1091, emphasis deleted). Not to be confused with the real thing—a human being—character *represents* humanity in a 'report of people's experience,' or a work of fiction that obeys artistic conventions. The author of a work of fiction mediates and interprets human experience.

This may seem a sound view on literature. However, the division between art and life that is defended by James is often confused by other writers. The boundary is blurred by the habit of believing that actual human beings serve as models for their fictional counterparts. Authors may, for instance, be taken to reproduce images of themselves in their novels. Authors themselves may indeed sustain that view, as when Joseph Conrad remarks that his "characters are created out of [his] own substance" (1916: 194).[2] But if authors are not seen as the model for the characters in their novels, then people they have met or heard about are thought to supply the stuff of character. Thus, it is obvious to Miriam Allott that "the novelist 'takes the infection' through his contact with other people" (1959: 199). As novels are modelled after reality, in other words, characters do not only *represent* humanity but are seen to be derived from actual human beings.

As a consequence, critics do not speak of 'characters' in literature, but of 'people,' as if there were no difference at all between the fictive and the real. The renowned Shakespearean critic A.C. Bradley offers extensive studies on character in Shakespeare's plays but does not use it

[2] Frederick Prescott has offered a theory of the Freudian relation between character and author, arguing that the "fictional character corresponding to the author is always a sort of dream-figure, in which the author's person is modified by a composition, in a way answering to the author's desires," and that "the characters may be split personalities of the author, or the author's person modified by characteristics of other persons" (1922: 193, 201). Wellek and Warren too write that the "novelist's potential selves ... are all potential personae" (1949:90)

as a critical term.[3] Instead, he uses terms such as 'heroes,' 'persons,' or 'human beings' (1904: 7,11,89). E.M. Forster, probably the most influential critic on character in English criticism, also prefers to speak of 'human beings,' although he is aware of the possibility of using other critical terms. Deliberating over a title for the chapter on characters in his *Aspects of the Novel*, he decides that "since the actors in a story are usually human, it seem[s] convenient to entitle this aspect People" (1927: 30).

Henry James argued that his characters are based on life but not to be confused with it. Other critics and authors, however, tend to overlook the artificial aspects of fiction and speak enthusiastically of human beings. Homo Sapiens and 'Homo Fictus' are intimately related, Forster writes (1927: 39). As virtual human beings, characters even appear to have a life of their own. Forster expresses the experience of many novelists when he says that characters have the tendency to "lead lives of their own" and "get out of hand" (1927: 46). On the part of the readers of fiction, characters seem to acquire a degree of autonomy too. They are easily extrapolated from the text, and readers tend to remember novels for their characters (Galsworthy 1931: 23; Culler 1975: 230). Thus, characters appear to be virtually autonomous, leading a 'life' independent of text, reader, or even author. Edwin Muir, for instance, writes of *Vanity Fair* that "the characters are not conceived as parts of the plot; on the contrary, they exist independently and the action is subservient to them" (1928: 23). In fact, critics have the tendency to treat characters as their best friends. Often, the Emmas and Annas of world literature are referred to without further specification such as surnames or even the novels they appear in!

Character does not only *represent* human beings. It gets out of hand, leads a wilful life of its own, is created as an autonomous being and seems a friend rather than a textual entity. It actually takes on the same qualities as human beings. Attempts at defining the nature of character in fiction therefore do not so much centre on its textual function but on the relationship between characters and human beings.

[3] When Bradley speaks of character he refers to 'personality.' See the relevant denotations of character in the OED: "12) moral qualities strongly developed or strikingly displayed; distinct or distinguished character; character worth speaking of;" "16) a person regarded in the abstract as the possessor of specified qualities; a personage, a personality; 16b) a person, a man, a fellow (freq. slightly derogatory); 17) a personality invested with distinctive attributes and qualities by a novelist or dramatist; also the personality or 'part' assumed by an actor on the stage; 18) An odd, extraordinary, or eccentric person."

However, the 'theories' that come out of this traditional concept of character are bound to be inadequate.

The myth of the natural

If characters are just like, or almost like human beings, then it should be possible to have a concept of the nature of the differences and similarities between fictional characters and real people. There is however no such concept that would apply to any text. Mostly, it is argued that character is closed: that is, when a novel is finished it is possible to form a coherent picture of character. Human beings, on the other hand, are open and unresolved.[4] Less often, but just as forcefully, it is argued that it is people who are coherent and unified, and that characters are only so when they function in a coherent text (Hochman 1985: 65). To some, a character is 'real' when it is subject to past, present, and future change (Harvey 1965: 120), to others, when it is "incorrigible" and "changeless" (McCarthy 1962: 288). Apparently, the result of a comparison of characters to human beings hinges entirely on the critic's idiosyncratic premises. In fact, it is *conventions* of representation that are at stake, as Virginia Woolf realized. During the heyday of modernism, she wrote that "the widest interpretation possible can be put upon [the words] 'to express character' [and] that there is nothing people differ more about than the reality of characters, especially in contemporary books" (1924: 416).[5] In her parody of the characterizations that Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy might give of "Mrs Brown," different mimetic conventions are wittily distinguished.

However, critics who use a representational concept of character rarely think in terms of the conventions of characterization, which explains why the comparisons between fictional characters and human beings are contradictory and subjective. The lifelike quality of characters—rather than conventions of mimesis—still lies at the core of traditional concepts of character. Moreover, a 'lifelike' quality functions simultaneously as an evaluative criterion. A century ago Walter Besant is reported to have argued that "characters must be real and such as

[4] This is argued by more than one critic, but Martin Price voices this position most clearly (1968: 288).

[5] This essay, "Character in Fiction," was later published as "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (1950).

might be met with in actual life" (James 1984b: 51). Since then, it appears, little has changed.

The keyword in this representational approach is 'natural.' Characters are only understood to be mimetic when the language in which they are rendered can be taken as a transparent medium that renders reality.[6] Most critics cited so far write about realist novels, precisely those texts which encourage the reader to take language self-evidently by not foregrounding its problematic status. Text and reader then co-operate to make language appear 'natural' and unproblematic. Consider what Bernard Bergonzi writes ironically about the tradition of novel-writing in England:

> Novel-writing is seen as a visible and established tradition, the niceties of which can be picked up as one goes along. It can even be regarded as a natural process like breathing, in which no conscious thought need be given to questions of style or construction. (Bergonzi 1970: 68)

In general, a 'natural' style is highly valued. John Bayley illustrates Bergonzi's point very nicely: "the greatest English literature ... has an absence of purpose, of insistence, and of individual insight" (Bayley 1960: 268), qualities, according to Bayley, that American literature lacks (270). The unproblematic status of language is the condition of representational character: Baruch Hochman asserts that language makes way to yield "the image of a character before we become conscious of the language that generates character" (1985: 41).

The notion that unobtrusive language and a 'natural' style are the ideal conditions for depicting mimetic character is reinforced by the frequent comparisons to nature whenever different types of character are distinguished. It turns out that when characters are convincingly representational, they are compared to something 'natural,' whereas when characters are seen to perform a mere technical function in the plot, 'technical' imagery is used. In the Preface to *Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James states that if some characters "in any work are of the essence, so others are only of the form" (1984a: 1081). The characters that are "of the form" are the "wheels to the coach" (1082). They keep the narrative

[6] Some postmodern critics are convinced that before postmodernism everyone falsely believed that there was a one-to-one correspondence between language and reality (cf. Klinkowitz 1984: 20-1). I do not share that view. The transparency of language has more to do with its being unobtrusive, a medium subject to narration.

going, in other words, and support the main characters. Such characters are cases "of the light *ficelle*, not of the true agent" (1082). Like a *ficelle* (a piece of string to hold a bundle together) such a character holds the narrative together, secures coherence, but adds nothing new. Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors* is such a *ficelle*: "she is the reader's friend much rather, ... an artful expedient for mere consistency of form, [whose] function is to give or add nothing whatever, but only to express as vividly as possible certain things quite other than itself and that are of the already fixed and pointed nature" (1984a: 1317, 1319). Without the use of *ficelles*, "half the dramatist's art" (1317), the organic unity of the narrative will fall apart. A decade after James, E.M. Forster reinforced the distinction between characters which are essential to the novel and those which only contribute to the form. Like Henry James, Forster describes the latter in technical terms. His 'flat' characters are like "little luminous disks" or a "gramophone record" (1927: 52, 49).

Characters which are of the 'essence' of the text, to speak with Henry James, or 'round,' as Forster would say, are described in images from nature. Forster's metaphors in particular are revealing. 'Round' characters are "ready for an extended life" (1927: 52), and Moll Flanders (a 'round' character) "stands alone in the novel like a tree in the park, so that we can see her from every aspect and are not bothered by rival growths" (39), while Jane Austen's characters, round or "capable of rotundity" (51) are like bushes in a shrubbery (45). Round characters, then, appear to be natural, whereas flat characters are functional and artificial. It seems a crude opposition, but the fact is that when the characters which are of the 'essence' of a novel are discussed, the attention shifts from a character's *technical* function in the narrative to its *psychological essence*. The quality of representation appears to depend on the suggestion that character has an inner life. What matters is the Cartesian ghost in the machine. Thus, James writes that "with Turgénieff as with Balzac the whole person springs into being at once; the character is never left shivering for its fleshy envelope" (1984a: 53). What James would later call "lucidity," "intelligence," or "consciousness," builds the true character: "they are each ... 'stories about women,' very young women, who, affected with a certain high lucidity, thereby become characters, in consequence of which their doings, their sufferings or whatever, take on, I assume, an importance" (1984a: 1147). Thus, character is a "vessel of consciousness."[7]

[7] In the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, James writes that he is aware of "the danger of filling too full any supposed and above all any obviously limited vessel of consciousness" (1984a: 1089).

The practice of seeing representational characters as embodying a psychological essence is widespread, and the emphasis on consciousness (at the expense of bodily features) is overwhelming. When Hochman speaks of the "underlying unity" of character or "coherence" grounded in psychological conflict, he presupposes such a psychological essence (1985: 98, 51), and so does W.J. Harvey for whom a mystical, ungraspable "heart of darkness" remains in untransparent character (1965: 71). Thus, character has an "inner vision" (Bayley 1960: 33,287) or an "inward life" (Scholes and Kellogg 1966: 165). Authors can reveal that inner life when they decide to "go behind" their characters, as Percy Lubbock put it (1921: 73).

Characters which do not suggest such an essence are therefore not convincingly representational. The mimetic bias of the critics discussed here leads to ascribing an 'inner life' to one group of characters, whereas others are 'only of the form.' It should be stressed, however, that such distinctions have no real theoretical value. Forster himself is rather offhand about his definitions—in fact, the tone of the series of lectures later published as *Aspects of the Novel* is not academic at all, and in any case less serious than that of James's critical work. Flat characters are "easily recognized whenever they come in" (1927, 47), and round characters are "defined by implication and no more be said" (53). And indeed no more is said.

Attempts by later critics to refine and improve on Forster's taxonomy suffer from the same analytical vagueness. W.J. Harvey distinguishes four categories: the protagonist, the background figure, the Jamesian ficelle, and the card. The difference between ficelle and background figure is that the ficelle is more prominent than the latter and that the background figure functions as the chorus; yet, rather inconsequently, Harvey also says of the ficelle that it can have a "mechanical role in the plot or act as chorus" (1965: 63). Such a classification will not get us very far. Likewise, the demarcation between protagonist and card ("the character who is a 'character' [61]) may blur, as Harvey admits (62). Taxonomies that seem to be more sophisticated because of a larger group of different types have the same theoretical weakness. An example from Hochman's *Character in Literature* will suffice. He identifies eight oppositional pairs, each pair distinguishing two types of character, and gives the following list:

Stylization	Naturalism
Coherence	Incoherence
Wholeness	Fragmentariness
Literalness	Symbolism
Complexity	Simplicity
Transparency	Opacity
Dynamism	Staticism
Closure	Openness (1985: 90)

But his definitions beg the question, as the following quotation may show:

> We know exactly what is meant when we are told that Anna Karenina is less stylized in presentation than Catherine Earnshaw and that Catherine Earnshaw is less stylized than Estella in *Great Expectations*, while Estella is still less stylized than Miss Havisham. (90)

Such a statement assumes that we understand intuitively what Hochman intends to explain by using such a term as stylization. Moreover, Hochman's 'definition' presumes that 'we,' the community of readers he is apparently addressing, will unquestionably collaborate with his reading.

Yet critics have not tired of using such classifications. Forster's careless distinction between 'flat' and 'round' characters is still dominant in Anglo-American criticism.[8] The analytical distinction that was proposed by Forster was to fit neatly in the evaluative scheme of New Criticism. To take one example, with Wayne Booth, 'flat' has come to connote "empty," and "conventional" (1961: 13). Or again, with Wellek and Warren, a flat characterization yields a "static" character, whereas a round one implies a "dynamic" character (1949: 219).

But as I have already suggested, critics who work on mimetic premises tend to hand out criteria for evaluation rather than models for analysis. Characters are only considered successful if they are 'natural' and possess psychological depth. They are different from more 'artificial' characters that lack inner life and are therefore less convincingly representational. But the proposed classifications of different characters are muddy and have no clear origin in textual conditions. In addition, most critics who write on character do not signal the problem of ident-

[8] Forster's division is discussed approvingly in one of the best known student's guide to literary terms (Abrams 1985).

ifying character in the text. It appears that the identification of character is self-evident. Only a few of the critics who have contributed to the traditional view of character have called attention to this point.

Figure and Ground

To early critics, character seemed the most important part of the novel. Novels were about character, as this passage from Henry James's *The Art of Fiction* illustrates:

> There is an old-fashioned distinction between the novel of character and the novel of incident, which must have cost many a smile to the intending fabulist [!] who was keen about his work ....I can as little imagine speaking of a novel of character as I can imagine speaking of a picture of character ....What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of characters?[9] (1984b: 54-5)

Likewise, Shakespearean tragedy is said to generate from the main characters (Bradley 1904: 7,11,89). More recently however, the problem of clearly identifying elements in the text that contribute to the idea of 'character' has started to baffle critics. The longer one stares at character, the more diffuse it seems. What makes up 'character,' and how are we to distinguish these elements from those that make up the 'plot'? Martin Price, echoing James, calls it a problem of figure and ground, and wonders whether the "person dissolve[s] into an agent of plot, or ... the plot seem[s], at some level, the working out of the characters' inherent natures?" (1968: 290).

Price's question entails a whole series of questions about character in literature. What makes us infer 'character'? Should it be based on human types, as the traditional approach would indicate, or can concepts, cities, animals, or even chairs be considered as characters, too? Sometimes critics argue that a big city is the real character of some

[9] One of the critics who misinterprets this passage is Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan who quotes the last two sentences and infers that to James plot and character are interdependent (1983, 35). The context of these famous words clearly indicates that to James it is almost a pleonasm to speak of a novel of characters, as all novels are about characters, and plots are determined by and, in their turn, illustrate characters.

novels, but this seems to be mere metaphor.[10] Elements of setting and descriptive passages can be taken to build up character. But if "environments, especially domestic interiors, may be viewed as metonymic, or metaphoric, expressions of character, [and] setting may be the expression of the human will," then it might be difficult to draw a clear line between setting and character (Wellek and Warren 1949: 221). What are we to make, for instance, of Lubbock's interpretation of *Madame Bovary*, which according to him is a "drama, where the two chief players are a woman on one side and her whole environment on the other" (1921: 83) ? Are the other characters in the book then only part of that environment? And if they are not, how are we to identify them?

Criticism that is oriented towards representation ignores the problems that are involved in identifying those elements in the text that make up character. The concept of representation apparently makes unnecessary a consideration of the problem of identifying character in the text. Psychological motives are discussed without detailed attention to textual constraints. Critics may never agree, for instance, on whether Fanny Price in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* is dull and impassive or rather a model of intelligence and patience, but the textual strategies which lead them towards their various interpretations are often absent from their discussions. Such neglect is not only the result of a representational concept of character, but also of the view that novels should be unselfconscious or, as we have termed it above, 'natural.' If language is seen as a transparent medium for narratives, then clearly little attention will be paid to the linguistic elements that, after all, constitute character: the very words on the page.

Yet characters in literature are in the first instance constituted by language, in the texts we read. Some of the critics discussed here have indeed tackled the linguistic constitution of character, but only in the most general way. For example, some critics note that characters are not only based on actual human beings, but may also be derived from characters in other texts.[11] Character is 'literary' rather than 'natural.'

[10] Consider for instance "New York is the virtual hero of Mr John Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer" (Carruthers 1927: 71) or "the great city (Paris, London, New York) ... is the most real of the characters of the modern novel" (Wellek and Warren 1949: 221).

[11] Wellek and Warren for instance write that in "the creation of character may be supposed to blend, in varying degrees, inherited literary types, persons observed, and the self" (Wellek and Warren 1949: 89). Much earlier Frederick Prescott had granted that "sometimes ... an earlier fictional character will be taken over by the imagination and developed, as we may suppose the Hamlet character, taken over from an earlier play, served Shakespeare as a starting point" (Prescott 1922: 211).

Additionally, some of those critics who are unwilling to give up a representational view of character, also attempt to come to terms with character's textual foundations. There is, for this group of critics, a dual nature to character. Character here is autonomous and representational, but also constituted by the text. Baruch Hochman is the most outspoken of this group.[12] He postulates that "character in itself does not exist unless it is retrieved from the text by our consciousness, together with everything else in the text" (1985: 32). Character is abstracted from the text. But when discussing Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Hochman maintains that Stephen's "most unconscious and perhaps most decisive motives are coded into the most deeply bound elements of the text, the words that constitute it" (72). Hochman sees a direct relation between the psychological essence of character and its linguistic zrepresentation. His use of the term "coded" suggests that the words of the text acquire an almost physical presence and Stephen's deeper drives are immanently contained right within those words.

Seeing both a virtual independence from texts and a necessary linguistic constitution of characters, Hochman spells out the paradox that "characters are utterly embedded in texts and utterly detachable from them" (74). This statement can be taken to indicate an approach to character that is not hampered by predominantly mimetic premises.

Conclusion

When critics speak unselfconsciously of characters in literature, they unwittingly participate in a discourse on character that has dominated for at least a century. A mimetic reading lies at the heart of the traditional concept of character. Because real people are taken to be models for characters in literature, representation is understood as a matter of fact rather than a literary convention. Not surprisingly, the borderline between fiction and reality is often crossed and critics speak of people rather than characters. As most critics seem to be unaware that the representation of reality is and has been subject to changing conventions, most discussions of character turn out to present models for evaluation, for distinguishing natural, representational characters which are psychologically complex from artificial characters which have no such depth. A closer look at the various classifications of character that have been proposed on such a basis reveals, however, that such taxonomies cannot

[12] See also Cohan (1983) or Price (1968).

be defended. Moreover, wholly lacking in the traditional approach are detailed discussions of the textual constraints that make up character. In fact, the textual grounding of characters is often ignored. Only Baruch Hochman has formulated the paradox that 'characters are utterly embedded in texts and utterly detachable from them.' I would like to take this statement as a transition to a discussion of concepts of character that are altogether different.

3. ALTERNATIVES TO THE TRADITION: ON ACTANTS AND SIGNS

If mimesis is the driving force behind the traditional view of character, the opposite is true in the case of structuralist theories. Structuralists maintain that character is a narrative function and should not be confused with human beings. From their point of view, a mimetic reading of character is merely guided by convention. Roland Barthes puts it as follows:

> On the one hand, the characters (whatever one calls them—*dramatis personae* or *actants*) form a necessary plane of description, outside of which the slightest reported 'actions' cease to be intelligible; so that it can be said that there is not a single narrative in the world without 'characters,' or at least without agents. Yet on the other hand, these—extremely numerous—'agents' can be neither described nor classified in terms of 'persons'—whether the 'person' be considered as a purely historical form, limited to certain genres (those most familiar to us it is true) ... or whether the 'person' is declared to be no more than a critical rationalization foisted by our age on pure narrative agents. (Barthes 1966: 105-6)

Whatever it is called, however, the concept of 'character' is for such structuralists as A.J. Greimas, the early Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and Philippe Hamon an indispensable element in narrative analysis.

In the concluding remarks to the preceding chapter, I suggested that the paradox that 'characters are utterly embedded in texts and utterly detachable from them' would serve as a starting point for a discussion of other theories of character. The dual nature of character runs through the different structural semiotic and narratological theories that will be discussed in this chapter, albeit in various guises. Binary terms such as actants and actors, signifiers and signifieds, or the analysis of character on the two different narratalogical levels of story and text, are all informed by a notion of duality. I shall now turn to the different possibilities for analyzing character which have been proposed by structuralist (or narratological) critics.

Actants and actors: a critique

According to A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, a structuralist semiotic theory should be generative and describe and analyze a semiotic event in terms of relation and opposition (Greimas, Courtés 1979: 292-3). This implies the notion of a deep structure or deep level to narrative. It is on such a deep level that rules operate to generate the surface level, the actual manifestation of the text.[1] The best known and most thorough account of a deep structure in narratives is offered by A.J. Greimas himself. At its most elementary, the deep structure is Greimas's famous semiotic square of oppositional relations. This most basic structure generates several other structures which in turn generate the surface text, the manifest discourse.

There is no trace of character in the basic structure. There are only relations of opposition and correlation in this deep-level 'semiotic square,' which operate in a logical way. Next comes Greimas's well-known actantial level. Despite the fact that Greimas calls this level rather confusingly 'anthropomorphous' (but not 'figurative'), he makes it clear that the actant is only a narrative function, and can be anything which acts, does, or makes (1970: 166-168). An actant manifests itself in the surface text as an actor, or a class of actors (1966: 175). Actants are therefore analytical abstractions of individuals, collectives, animals, or concepts (1979: 7). Greimas has named six possible narrative functions, or six such actants. He distinguishes a sender (or dispatcher), a receiver, an object, a subject, a helper, and an opponent (1966: 176-180). For a long time, Greimas has maintained that six was the sacred number,[2] but in 1979 the last two actants are not mentioned in the

[1] Greimas' semiotic theory of narrative is indebted to the theory of a generative linguistics which was founded by Noam Chomsky. In Chomskyan linguistics, the deep structure is the basic grammatical structure of language. Transformational rules operate on this deep structure to generate the utterances on the performance level. Analogous to the case of generative linguistics, Greimas maintains that his generative 'grammar' of the deep structure accounts for all narratives. Greimas is not alone in his aim to offer a theory of narrative that is universally valid and that applies to all narrative texts. The German narratologist Franz Stanzel, for instance, defines his approach as a "move towards a 'grammar of fiction'" (1978: 247). Todorov even thought that such a universal narrative would coincide with the structure of the universe, and elucidate the place of man (1969: 15).

[2] "Le troisième critère typologique pourrait éventuellement être celui de l'absence d'un ou de plusieurs des actants. Les considérations théoriques ne permettent d'envisager qu'avec beaucoup de scepticisme une telle possibilité" (Greimas 1966: 184). A few pages before, however, Greimas has already commented on the 'secondary character' of the two actants helper and opponent. For a critique on actants see Jonathan Culler (1975, 233-235).