

CHAPTER 2

Character

One of the most common ways of overlooking the ‘literariness’ of a play or novel is to treat its characters as though they were actual people. In one sense, to be sure, this is almost impossible to avoid. To describe Lear as bullying, irascible and self-deluded is inevitably to make him sound like some modern-day newspaper mogul. The difference between Lear and the mogul, however, is that the former is simply a pattern of black marks on a page, whereas the latter, more’s the pity, is not. The mogul had an existence before we encountered him, which is not true of literary characters. Hamlet was not really a university student before the play opens, even though the play itself tells us that he was. He was nothing at all. Hedda Gabler does not exist a second before she steps on stage, and all we shall ever know about her is what Ibsen’s play decides to tell us. There are no other sources of information available.

When Heathcliff disappears from *Wuthering Heights* for a mysterious stretch of time, the novel does not tell us where he runs off to. There is a theory that he returns to the Liverpool where he was first discovered as a child and grows rich in the slave trade there, but it is equally possible that he sets up a hairdressing salon in Reading. The truth is that he does not end up in any place on the

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map. Instead, he takes himself off to an indeterminate location. There are no such locations in real life, not even Gary, Indiana, but there are in fiction. We might also ask how many teeth Heathcliff has, to which the only possible answer is an indeterminate number. It is legitimate for us to infer that he has teeth, but the work does not tell us how many. A celebrated critical essay is entitled 'How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?' We can deduce from the play that she has probably given birth to at least one, but we are not told whether there are more. So Lady Macbeth has an indeterminate number of children, which may prove convenient when applying for child benefit.

Literary figures have no pre-history. It is said that a theatre director who was staging one of Harold Pinter's plays asked the playwright for some hints as to what his characters were up to before they came on stage. Pinter's reply was 'Mind your own fucking business.' Emma Woodhouse, the heroine of Jane Austen's novel *Emma*, exists only as long as somebody is reading about her. If nobody is reading about her at any given time (an unlikely eventuality, given the brilliance of the novel and the billions of English-language readers in the world), she lapses into non-existence. Emma does not survive the conclusion of *Emma*. She lives in a text, not a grand country mansion, and a text is a transaction between itself and a reader. A book is a material object which exists even if nobody picks it up, but this is not true of a text. A text is a pattern of meaning, and patterns of meaning do not lead lives of their own, like snakes or sofas.

Some Victorian novels end by peering fondly into their characters' futures, imagining them growing old, grey and gleeful among a horde of frolicsome grandchildren. They find it hard to let their characters go, as parents sometimes find it hard to let their children go. But peering fondly into one's characters' futures is, of course,

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simply a literary device. Literary figures do not have futures, any more than incarcerated serial killers do. Shakespeare makes this point in a beautiful passage towards the end of *The Tempest*, another part of which we have looked at already:

be cheerful, sir.

*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep . . .*

As the drama draws to a close, its characters and events vanish into thin air, since, being fictions, there is nowhere else for them to go. Their author, too, is just about to disappear from the London theatre and return home to his native Stratford. Interestingly, this speech by Prospero does not contrast the unreality of the stage with the solid, flesh-and-blood existence of real men and women. On the contrary, it seizes on the flimsiness of dramatic characters as a metaphor for the fleeting, fantasy-ridden quality of actual human lives. It is we who are made of dreams, not just such figments of Shakespeare's imagination as Ariel and Caliban. The cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces of this earth are mere stage scenery after all.

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The theatre can teach us some truth, but it is the truth of the illusory nature of our existence. It can alert us to the dream-like quality of our lives, their brevity, mutability and lack of solid grounds. As such, by reminding us of our mortality, it can foster in us the virtue of humility. This is a precious accomplishment, since much of our moral trouble springs from the unconscious assumption that we will live for ever. In fact, our lives will meet with as categorical a conclusion as the end of *The Tempest*. This, however, may not be as dismaying as it sounds. If we were to accept that our existence is as fragile and fugitive as that of Prospero and Miranda, we might reap some advantage from doing so. We might cling to life in a less white-knuckled way, and so enjoy ourselves more and injure others less. Perhaps this is why Prospero, rather strangely in the context, urges us to be cheerful. The transience of things is not wholly to be regretted. If love and bottles of Châteauneuf-du-Pape pass away, so do wars and tyrants.

The word 'character' nowadays can mean a sign, letter or symbol as well as a literary figure. It derives from an ancient Greek term meaning a stamping tool which makes a distinctive mark. From there it came to mean the peculiar mark of an individual, rather like his signature. A character, like a character reference today, was a sign, portrait or description of what a man or woman was like. Then, after a while, it came to mean the man or woman as such. The sign that had stood for the individual became the individual herself. The distinctiveness of the mark became the uniqueness of the person. The word 'character' is thus an example of the figure of speech known as synecdoche, in which a part represents the whole.

This is of more than merely technical interest. The shift from character as the peculiar mark of an individual to character as the individual himself is bound up with a whole social history. It

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belongs, in a word, to the rise of modern individualism. Individuals are now defined by what is peculiar to them, such as their signature or inimitable personality. What distinguishes us from each other is more important than what we have in common. What makes Tom Sawyer Tom Sawyer is all those attributes he does not share with Huck Finn. Lady Macbeth is what she is because of her ferocious will and thrusting ambition, not because she suffers, laughs, grieves and sneezes. Since these are things she shares with the rest of her species, they do not really count as part of her character. Pressed to an extreme, this rather curious conception of men and women suggests that a great deal, perhaps most, of what they are and do is not really *them*. It is not distinctive to them; and since character or personality is thought to be incomparable, it cannot count as part of it.

Today, the term 'character' means an individual's mental and moral qualities, as in Prince Andrew's comment that being shot at during the Falklands War was 'very character-building'. Perhaps he would care to have his character built a little more often. The word also, of course, refers to figures in novels, plays, movies and the like. We still use the term of actual people, however, as in 'Who were those characters throwing up out of the Vatican window?' It can also mean a capricious or idiosyncratic individual, as in 'By God, sir, he's a character!' The phrase is interestingly used more about men than about women, and reflects a very English delight in eccentricity. The English tend to admire curmudgeonly, nonconformist types who make a point of not fitting in with their fellows. Such oddballs are agreeably incapable of being anything but themselves. People who carry a stoat on their shoulder or wear brown paper bags over their heads are said to be characters, which suggests that their aberrations are to be genially indulged. There is a spirit of

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tolerance about the word 'character'. It saves you from having to take certain people into protective custody.

As in the fiction of Charles Dickens, this quiriness can range from the lovable to the downright sinister. There are also Dickens characters who hover somewhere between the two, full of amusing foibles but also faintly alarming. They seem unable to see the world from anyone's perspective but their own. This kind of moral squint makes them comic, but also potentially monstrous. There is a thin line between a vigorous independence of mind and being shut off from other people inside one's own ego. Being walled up inside oneself for too long results in a sort of insanity. 'Characters' are never far from a kind of madness, as the life of Samuel Johnson would suggest. The fascinating is only a step away from the freakish.

You cannot have a deviation without a norm. Idiosyncratic people may take pride in being stubbornly themselves, but there is a sense in which their waywardness is dependent on the existence of 'normal' men and women. What counts as eccentric depends on what is taken as standard behaviour. This, once again, is clear enough from the world of Dickens, whose figures tend to divide between the conventional and the grotesque. For every Little Nell, a dreary paragon of virtue in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, there is a Quilp, a savage dwarf in the same novel who chews lighted cigars and threatens to bite his wife. For every faceless young gent like Nicholas Nickleby there is a Wackford Squeers, the one-eyed monster of a rogue schoolmaster in the same work, who rather than teaching his downtrodden students to spell the word 'window' gets them to clean the school windows instead.

The problem is that if the normal characters have all the virtue, the freakish figures have all the life. Nobody would have an orange juice with *Oliver Twist* if they could share a beer with Fagin.

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Roguery is more alluring than respectability. Once the Victorian middle classes had defined normality as thrift, prudence, patience, chastity, meekness, self-discipline and industriousness, the devil was clearly going to have all the best tunes. In such a situation, aberration is plainly the option to go for. Hence the postmodern obsession with vampires and Gothic horrors, the perverse and peripheral, which has become as much an orthodoxy as thrift and chastity once were. Few readers of *Paradise Lost* prefer Milton's God, who speaks like a constipated civil servant, to his smoulderingly defiant Satan. In fact, it is almost possible to pinpoint the first moment in English history at which virtue becomes boring and vice beguiling. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, admires such heroic or aristocratic qualities as courage, honour, glory and magnanimity; the philosopher John Locke, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, champions the middle-class values of industry, thrift, sobriety and moderation.

Even so, it is not quite true that Dickens's grotesques transgress the norm. They certainly flout conventional forms of conduct. But they are so stuck in their ways, so compulsively consistent in their offbeatness, that they come to represent norms in themselves. They are as much prisoners of their own outlandish habits as the respectable characters are prisoners of convention. We are presented with a society in which everyone is his or her own measure. Everyone just does his own thing, whether it consists of biting his wife or jingling the change in his pockets. This, however, is as far from authentic freedom as one could imagine. Common standards have almost collapsed, and along with them any genuine communication. Characters speak in private idioms and opaque jargon. They collide randomly with one another rather than

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interrelating. All of this is hilariously prefigured in Laurence Sterne's great eighteenth-century anti-novel *Tristram Shandy*, which is peopled by a bunch of freaks, obsessives, paranoiacs and emotional cripples. This is only one of several reasons why it is among the great comic masterpieces of English literature.

Virtuous literary characters may not be exactly enthralling, but there are novels and plays which seem to be aware of the fact. Fanny Price, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, is a dutiful, impeccably well-behaved young woman, and (so many readers of the novel have felt) not a little pallid. She is meek, passive and something of a pain. Yet it is as though the novel has a riposte ready to hand to anyone tactless enough to point this out. How else is a young, unmarried woman without money, social rank or responsible parents to defend herself in the kind of predatory society the novel portrays? Isn't Fanny's lack of vitality an implicit criticism of that social order? She is not, after all, an Emma Woodhouse, rich, attractive, high-ranking and thus able to do pretty well as she likes. Those who are powerful can afford to kick over the traces, whereas the poor and defenceless must look out for themselves. They must court the charge of being insipid in order to avoid graver accusations. If Fanny is something of a drag, it is not her fault. Nor is it the fault of her author, who is well capable of presenting vivacious young women.

One might feel much the same about Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. Self-righteous, moralistic and mildly masochistic, Jane is hardly the most agreeable heroine one could hope to share a taxi with. As a critic once remarked of Samuel Richardson's Pamela, it is not so much that she is scheming as that she is *unconsciously* scheming. Yet it is hard to see how she could be open-hearted and high-spirited in the oppressive circumstances in which she finds

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herself. As long as there are bigamously minded Rochesters around, as well as religious fanatics like St John Rivers eager to drag you off to an early death in Africa, an orphaned, penniless young woman like Jane would be ill advised to relax her moral vigilance. Pleasantness is for those who can afford it.

This is also true of one of the greatest female figures in English literature, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. Few characters have received such a mauling at the hands of the critics. *Clarissa*, who refuses to go to bed with a dissolute aristocrat and is raped by him instead, has been variously described as prudish, priggish, morbid, narcissistic, self-dramatising, masochistic, hypocritical, self-deluded and (this from a female critic) 'a ripe temptation to violence'. Few examples of resplendent virtue have been so cordially detested. Richardson's heroine is certainly pious, high-minded and mildly self-deluded. Yet all she is really doing is protecting her chastity in a brutally patriarchal world. If she is not the kind of woman one would gladly accompany on a pub crawl, unlike Shakespeare's *Viola* or Thackeray's *Becky Sharp*, the novel makes it clear enough why she cannot afford to be.

Innocence in a dissolute society is always likely to be mildly amusing. The eighteenth-century novelist Henry Fielding loves his good-hearted characters, like *Joseph Andrews* and *Parson Adams* in *Pamela*, but he also delights in sending them up. The innocent are likely to be credulous and naive, and are thus always a rich source of satiric comedy. The good are bound to be gullible, since how can virtue look sharp for itself and still be virtue? To be guileless is as absurd as it is admirable. Fielding thus uses his good-hearted characters to expose the rogues and scoundrels around them, while at the same time poking some gentle fun at their unworldly innocence. If the novel itself were not looking out for

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their welfare, they would probably sink without trace before the end of the first chapter.

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Some time back, I referred to idiosyncratic characters as ‘types’, which seems to be something of a contradiction. (The word ‘type’, incidentally, can also mean a printed letter, just like the word ‘character.’) To typecast individuals is to slot them into certain categories rather than to perceive them as beyond compare. Yet it makes perfect sense to speak of a quirky type, not least because there are a lot of them around. Ironically, words like ‘quirky’, ‘oddball’ and ‘singular’ are generic terms, meaning terms referring to a whole group or class. They are quite as generic as ‘celibate’ or ‘courageous’. One can even speak of different types of eccentric. So even freakish people are not unclassifiable. Oddballs can have as much in common with each other as rock climbers or right-wing Republicans.

We like to think of individuals as unique. Yet if this is true of everyone, then we all share the same quality, namely our uniqueness. What we have in common is the fact that we are all uncommon. Everybody is special, which means that nobody is. The truth, however, is that human beings are uncommon only up to a point. There are no qualities that are peculiar to one person alone. Regrettably, there could not be a world in which only one individual was irascible, vindictive or lethally aggressive. This is because human beings are not fundamentally all that different from each other, a truth postmodernists are reluctant to concede. We share an enormous amount in common simply by virtue of being human, and this is revealed by the vocabularies we have for discussing human character. We even share the social processes by which we come to individuate ourselves.

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It is true that individuals combine these shared qualities in very different ways, which is part of what makes them so distinctive. But the qualities themselves are common currency. It would make no more sense to claim that only I could be insanely jealous than it would to call the coin in my pocket a dime even though nobody else did. Chaucer and Pope would no doubt have taken this for granted, though Oscar Wilde and Allen Ginsberg would probably have not. Literary critics may think of individuals as incomparable, but sociologists beg to differ. If most human beings were delightfully unpredictable, sociologists would be out of a job. They take no interest in the individual, any more than Stalinists do. Instead, they investigate shared patterns of behaviour. It is a sociological truth that lines at supermarket checkouts are always roughly the same length, since human beings are alike in their reluctance to spend too much time on tedious, relatively trivial tasks such as paying for their groceries. Anyone who queued up just for fun would be seriously strange. It might be a kindness to report him to the social services.

To try to capture the 'essence' of an individual, in the sense of what makes her peculiarly herself, is inevitably to find ourselves using generic terms. This is as true of literature as it is of everyday speech. Literary works are sometimes thought to be concerned above all with the concrete and specific. Yet there is an irony here. A writer may pile phrase upon phrase and adjective upon adjective in order to pin down the elusive essence of a thing. But the more language he throws at a character or situation, the more he tends to bury it beneath a heap of generalities. Or the more he simply buries it beneath language itself. Here, for example, is the celebrated case of Charles Bovary's hat, from Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*:

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His was one of those composite pieces of headgear in which you might trace features of bearskin, lancer-cap and bowler, night-cap and otterskin: one of those pathetic objects that are deeply expressive in their dumb ugliness, like an idiot's face. An oval splayed out with whale-bone, it started off with three pompoms; these were followed by lozenges of velvet and rabbit's fur alternately, separated by a red band, and after that came a kind of bag ending in a polygon of cardboard with intricate braiding on it; and from this there hung down like a tassel, at the end of a long, too slender cord, a little sheaf of gold threads. It was a new cap, with a shiny peak.

This is verbal overkill with a vengeance. As critics have pointed out, Charles's cap is almost impossible to visualise. Trying to assemble these details into a coherent whole baffles the imagination. This cap is the kind of object that could exist only in literature. It is a product of language alone. It is impossible to imagine it being worn on the street. By being so absurdly elaborate, Flaubert's description undoes itself. The more a writer specifies, the more information he provides. Yet the more information he provides, the more room he creates for divergent interpretations on the reader's part. And the result of this may not be vividness and specificity but haziness and ambiguity.

In this sense, writing is something of a mug's game. It is as though the Flaubert passage is mischievously making this point, blinding us not with science but with signs. It is a joke at the reader's expense. And what is true of a cap is also true of character. Literary characters, at least in realist fiction, are thought to be at their finest when they are most richly individuated. Yet if they were not also to some extent types, revealing qualities we have

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encountered before, they would be unintelligible. A completely original literary figure would slip through the net of language, leaving us with nothing whatsoever to say. A type, however, is not necessarily a stereotype. It does not follow from this argument that Aristotle is right when he remarks that it would be inappropriate for an artist to portray a woman as clever. Stereotypes reduce men and women to general categories, whereas types preserve their individuality but lend it some broader context. A cynic might take this to mean that Irishmen are forever engaged in drunken brawling, but that each does so in his own unique way.

It is true that literature, and perhaps poetry above all, can make us feel as though we are in the presence of the irreducibly specific. Yet this involves a certain sleight of hand. Nothing is absolutely specific, if by this one means that it defeats all general categories. We can identify objects only in language, and language is general by nature. If it were not, we would need a different word for every rubber duck and stick of rhubarb in the world. Even terms like 'this', 'here', 'now' and 'utterly unique' are generic. There is no special word for my particular pair of eyebrows or fits of sulkiness. To say 'octopus' is to imply that this specific octopus resembles others. In fact, there is nothing that does not resemble something else in some respect. The Great Wall of China resembles the concept of heartache in that neither can peel a banana.

In any case, the view that literary works deal in the tangible and immediate, rather than the abstract and general, is of fairly recent vintage. It comes to us mostly from the Romantics. Samuel Johnson, writing in the eighteenth century, thought it a lapse of good taste to concern oneself overmuch with the specific. For him, the universal was a good deal more enticing. For some people today, this would be almost as bizarre as finding trigonometry

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more exciting than sex. This is a sign of how much romanticism, with its passion for the particular, has stealthily transformed our sensibilities.

So nothing is absolutely itself. This, however, is a problem only for post-Romantics. Authors like Dante, Chaucer, Pope and Fielding did not see individuality in quite this way. They did not regard it as the opposite of the general. On the contrary, they recognised that qualities common to the human species went into the making of it. In fact, the word 'individual' used to mean 'indivisible'. It signified that individuals were inseparable from some larger context. Only because we are born into human societies do we become individual persons. This, perhaps, is one reason why the word 'singular' can also mean 'strange'. For the ancients, a monster meant a creature beyond the pale of social existence.

One of the earliest pieces of literary criticism we have, Aristotle's *Poetics*, is mostly a discussion of tragedy, yet its central focus is by no means on character. In fact, Aristotle seems to believe that one could have a tragedy that was entirely without characters. In his play *Breath*, Samuel Beckett goes a few steps further, coming up with a drama that has no plot, characters, storyline, dialogue, scenery or (scarcely) duration. What matters above all for Aristotle is the plot or dramatic action. Individual characters are really just 'supports' for this. They exist not for themselves but for the sake of the action, which Aristotle thinks of as a communal affair. The ancient Greek word for drama literally means 'something done'. Characters may lend the action a certain colouring, but it is what happens that comes first. To overlook this while watching a tragedy would be like treating a football game simply as the acts of a set of solitary individuals, or as a chance for each of them to display 'personality'. The fact that some players behave as though this is

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precisely what football games are about should not distract us from this point.

It is not that Aristotle thought character unimportant in general. On the contrary, he regarded it as supremely important, as another of his books, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, makes clear. This work is all about moral values, qualities of character, the difference between virtuous and vicious individuals, and so on. Aristotle's view of character in the real-life sense, however, differs from some modern versions of it. Here, too, he sees action as primary. It is what men and women do, the way they realise or fail to realise their creative powers in the public arena, that matters most from a moral viewpoint. You could not be virtuous simply on your own. Virtue is not like knitting a sock or chewing a carrot. Ancient thinkers were less likely than modern ones to view individuals as existing in splendid isolation. They would no doubt have had some trouble in understanding Hamlet, not to speak of being utterly bemused by the work of Marcel Proust or Henry James. Being utterly bemused by Proust and James is a familiar experience today as well, but for rather different reasons.

This is not to say that ancient authors regarded men and women as zombies. It is simply that they had rather different notions of consciousness, emotion, psychology and so on from our own. Thinkers like Aristotle are perfectly aware that human beings have an inner life. It is just that they do not typically start from there, as so much Romantic and modernist writing does. Instead, they tend to place this inner life in the context of action, kinship, history and the public world. We have inner lives only because we belong to a language and a culture. We can conceal our thoughts and feelings, of course, but this is a social practice we have to learn. A baby cannot conceal anything. Aristotle also recognised that our public

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actions have an active influence on our inner lives. Performing virtuous acts helps us to become virtuous. Homer and Virgil begin from men and women as practical, social, embodied beings, and look at human consciousness in this light. So do Aeschylus and Sophocles. The gradual loss of this view of human beings is closely bound up with the withering of our sense of society. Our current notions of literary character are for the most part those of a robustly individualist social order. They are also of quite recent historical origin. They are far from the only way of picturing the human person.

For Aristotle, character is one element in a complex artistic design. It is not to be ripped rudely out of context, as critics used to do when they wrote essays with titles like 'The Girlhood of Ophelia' or 'Would Iago Make a Good Governor of Arizona?' It is true that real-life people are also always encountered in some kind of significant setting. We always perceive each other against some background or other. Human beings are never not in a situation. Not to be sure what situation one is in is to be in the situation known as doubt. To be outside any situation whatsoever is known as being dead. It is true that some people create far more dramatic scenarios by dying than they ever did in living, but these are scenarios for others, not for themselves. Real people, however, since they are more than linguistic creations, have a degree of independence of their surroundings, which is not true of Josef K or the Wife of Bath. Because they can put some daylight between themselves and their situations, they can also transform them, whereas cockroaches and literary characters are stuck with them for ever. The Wife of Bath cannot decide to migrate from *The Canterbury Tales* to *The Sound and the Fury*, whereas we can always kiss goodbye to Sunderland and move to Sacramento.

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Because men and women are more than mere functions of their environments, they can come to believe that they are autonomous, a word which literally means 'a law unto oneself'. They can see themselves as standing free of each other and their societies. On this view, they are the source of their own actions, solely and entirely responsible for what they do, ultimately dependent on nothing but themselves. They behave, in short, as Shakespeare describes Coriolanus: 'As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin'. It is the assumption that everyone is solely and entirely responsible for what they do that lands so many people on death row in the United States.

This is not a view of human beings that most ancient or medieval thinkers would have endorsed. Neither, one suspects, would Shakespeare. Take, for example, his Othello. Othello is, of course, a character in a play, but he also behaves like one, and tends to regard himself as one. He is full of grandiloquent rhetoric and dramatic self-display. He has the charismatic presence of a man of the theatre. Early in the play's action, he breaks up a fight with the resonant declaration 'Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.' It is a splendidly attention-grabbing line, as though spoken by an actor playing an actor. Perhaps Othello has been assiduously rehearsing it while waiting in the wings. The words may allude to Jesus' command to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane to sheath their swords, which gives them an even more authoritative ring. This man is not only a first-class performer; he even has a touch of the second person of the Blessed Trinity about him. Yet he is, so to speak, an actor of the old school, who regards the stage as a chance to show off his larger-than-life personality, and whose sense of other people is somewhat dim. Teamwork is not Othello's strongest point. He lives straight

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out of a self-image. It is one of his few points of resemblance to Ernest Hemingway, apart from the fact that Hemingway, too, committed suicide. Othello is a character without a context – literally so, since as a Moor, a man of mixed Berber and Arab stock, he is something of a displaced person in his adopted city of Venice.

The Moor of Venice is a resplendent creation, but we will go astray if we accept his own estimate of himself too readily. There is a histrionic quality to this hero. He is a man who seems curiously aware that he is speaking Shakespearian blank verse:

*Never, Iago. Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont;
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up . . .*

Othello dies at the end of the play, as tragic heroes tend to do, but he is determined to go out on a high theatrical note:

*Set you down this:
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him – thus. (He stabs himself)*

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As one critic wryly comments, it is a magnificent *coup de théâtre*. This man can even turn the act of stabbing himself into a self-congratulatory gesture. He idealises himself even at the point of death.

By setting Othello in the context of the play as a whole, seeing how its mode of characterising him is interwoven with theme, plot, mood, imagery and so on, we can come up with an idea of literary character rather different from his own. He no longer appears such a grandly autonomous being. This is one way to avoid speaking of characters as though they lived in your apartment building. Hamlet is not simply a despondent young prince; he is also an occasion for certain reflections by the play as a whole, the embodiment of certain ways of seeing and modes of feeling which stretch far beyond himself. He is a complex of insights and preoccupations rather than just a student with a shady stepfather. We also need to examine the techniques by which character is manufactured. Is a particular literary figure presented simply as a type or emblem, or is she subtly psychologised? Is she grasped from the inside or treated from other characters' standpoints? Is she seen as coherent or self-contradictory, static or evolving, firmly etched or fuzzy at the edges? Are characters viewed in the round or stripped to functions of the plot? Are they defined through their actions and relationships, or do they loom up as disembodied consciousnesses? Do we feel them as vivid physical presences or essentially verbal ones, as readily knowable or as full of elusive depths?

One of the achievements of the great European realist novel, from Stendhal and Balzac to Tolstoy and Thomas Mann, is to illustrate this interweaving of character and context. Characters in this kind of fiction are seen as caught up in a web of complex mutual dependencies. They are formed by social and historical forces

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greater than themselves, and shaped by processes of which they may be only fitfully conscious. This is not to say that they are just the playthings of these powers. On the contrary, they play an active part in shaping their own destinies. But it is not as though the whole of reality is spun out of the guts of a few great men existing in splendid isolation. As George Eliot puts it, there is no private life that has not been influenced by a wider public one. The realist novel tends to grasp individual lives in terms of histories, communities, kinship and institutions. It is in these frameworks that the self is seen as embedded. Just as there are many things that go into the making of a literary work beside an author, so there are many things that go into the making of a realist character. There is a difference between this realist project and the modernist novel, which quite often presents us with a single, solitary consciousness. Think, for example, of Beckett's *Malone Dies* or Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.

Characters in the realist tradition are generally presented as complex, credible, fully rounded individuals. Many of them seem a lot more real than the people next door. Some of them are also a lot more agreeable. Without this array of superbly realised figures, some of whom have assumed the status of myth and legend, world literature would be much the poorer. Even so, we should be aware that the realist idea of character is only one of several. There are many works of literature which are not especially eager to tell us what the protagonist had for breakfast, or what colour of socks his chauffeur wears. The New Testament represents Jesus as a character of sorts, but it has no interest in delving into his mind. Such psychologising would be irrelevant to its purposes. The work is not intended to be a biography. It does not even tell us what its central character looked like. If they were taking a creative writing course

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today, the Gospel writers might well find themselves handed a shamefully low grade.

The same relative indifference to what goes on inside people's heads can be found in the Book of Isaiah, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the medieval mystery plays, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* and a good many other eminent works of literature. One of the finest of twentieth-century English authors, Evelyn Waugh, once observed that 'I regard writing not as an investigation of character, but as an exercise in the use of language, and with this I am obsessed. I have no technical psychological interest. It is drama, speech and events that interest me.' Aristotle would have understood what he meant, though Scott Fitzgerald might have been somewhat mystified.

The modernists are in search of new modes of characterisation, suitable to a post-Victorian age. What it feels like to be a person is not quite the same for Franz Kafka as it is for George Eliot, and certainly not for whoever wrote the Upanishads or the Book of Daniel. Eliot sees character as 'a process and an unfolding', which is not at all how Woolf or Beckett regard it. For them, human beings do not have that much consistency and continuity. The typical realist character tends to be reasonably stable and unified, more like Amy Dorrit or David Copperfield than Joyce's Stephen Dedalus or T.S. Eliot's Gerontion. As such, it reflects an era when identity was felt on the whole to be less problematic than it is today. People could still see themselves as the agents of their own destinies. They had a fairly acute sense of where they stopped and other people began. Their personal and collective history, for all its ups and downs, seems to represent a coherent evolution, one which was more likely to issue in felicity than in catastrophe.

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Modernism, by contrast, pitches the whole concept of identity into crisis. Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, the twin protagonists of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, appear to be in reasonable command of their lives as they stroll aimlessly around Dublin. This, however, is a kind of joke at their expense, since the reader is conscious that a good deal of what they do is determined by the novel's Homeric subplot. They themselves are not aware that their lives are being secretly scripted in this way, since they are not readers of the novel in which they appear. It is as though they stand to the Homeric subplot as the ego stands to the unconscious. We shall see later that modernism also throws orthodox notions of narrative into question, in a world where it is becoming hard to deliver an agreed, coherent, overarching account of human affairs. In *Ulysses*, for example, very little happens. Or at least, as with the Marabar Caves, it is hard to say whether anything happens or not. In *Waiting for Godot*, as one critic famously remarked, nothing happens twice over, first in Act 1 and then in Act 2.

So the modernists seek to question stock notions of character. Some of them do so by pressing the psychological complexity of literary figures to the point where character in its classical sense begins to disintegrate. Once you start to see human consciousness as unfathomably intricate, it is hard to contain it within the well-defined limits of Walter Scott's Rob Roy or Robert Louis Stevenson's Jim Hawkins. Instead, it begins to spill out over the edges, seeping into its surroundings as well as into other selves. This is especially true of Virginia Woolf's fiction, where identity is more elusive and indeterminate than it is in Trollope or Thomas Hardy. This indeterminacy is not always to be applauded, as postmodernists tend to assume. It can involve a traumatic sense of loss and anxiety. Having too little identity can be quite as disabling as having too much.

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If the self is bound up with its changing experiences, then it no longer has the unity and consistency of Bunyan's *Everyman* or Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. It is less able to recount a coherent story of itself. Its beliefs and desires do not necessarily hang together to form a seamless whole. Neither do the works in which such characters appear. From Aristotle to the present day, critics have tended to assume that literary works should be tightly integrated wholes, with not a stray symbol dangling or a hair out of place. But why should this necessarily be a value? Can't conflict and dissonance be commendable as well? Perhaps, as Woolf sometimes suspects, the self is just a bundle of chance sensations and perceptions, with only a vacancy at its core. Joyce's Leopold Bloom has a modernist mind of this kind, responsive to fragments of sensation but with little continuity. It is true that he is also a fully rounded, painstakingly detailed figure, but this is among other things a satirical send-up of the realist or naturalistic notion of character. If George Eliot shows her characters seated at breakfast, Joyce will go one step further and show his hero seated on the lavatory. Bloom is the creation of a dissident Irishman taking a smack at the stoutly realist British. Oscar Wilde, another subversive Irishman who made a career out of baiting the British, described truth as 'one's latest mood'. For him to be truly free meant to be free of a consistent selfhood, as well as being free to bed the sons of the English nobility.

There is another way in which modernist works seek to dismantle traditional ideas of character. This is by trying to reveal something of the forces that shape the self at the deepest level. D.H. Lawrence declared that he was not concerned with character or personality, since the depths of selfhood he was plumbing lay far beneath the conscious ego. In the wake of Freud, orthodox notions of identity are bound to be thrown into question. Conscious life is now just

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the tip of the iceberg of the self. The selfhood which Lawrence explores lies somewhere on the far side of ideas, emotions, personality, moral viewpoints or routine relationships. It belongs to some dark, primeval, profoundly impersonal realm of being. And this is a terrain where realist authors could not hope to tread. The self for Lawrence is not something we can master. It has its own enigmatic logic, and will go its own sweet way. We are really strangers to ourselves. And if we are not in possession of ourselves, then we cannot foist our identities on others either. So there is an ethics and a politics involved in this way of seeing.

T.S. Eliot is also disdainful of mere consciousness, and largely indifferent to individual personality. What seizes his attention are the myths and traditions which shape the individual self. It is these deeper forces that his work seeks to elicit. And these forces lie far below the individual mind, in a kind of collective unconscious. It is here that we all share in the same timeless myths and spiritual wisdom. So the conscious meaning of a poem does not matter all that much. This is why Eliot did not greatly care what interpretations of his work readers came up with. It is the impact his poetry makes on the guts, the nervous system and the unconscious which concerns him most. It is ironic, then, that Eliot is often seen as a dauntingly intellectual author. His poetry is full of cryptic symbolism and erudite allusions. Yet 'intellectual' is one of the last words to describe his writing. His poems are built out of words, images and sensations rather than ideas. In fact, he did not believe that a poet could think in his poetry at all.

True to this anti-intellectualism, Eliot once remarked that his ideal reader would be an uneducated one. He himself claimed to enjoy Dante in the original without being able to read Italian. Fool that you are, you might think you haven't a clue what is going on in *The Waste*

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Land and *Four Quartets*, but at some subliminal level you are understanding them all the time. Among other things, this is because those lucky enough to live in Europe are part of something called the European Mind, whether they know it or not. But an Indonesian fisherman could probably grasp the meaning of *The Waste Land* too, since he has intuitive knowledge of the great spiritual archetypes on which it draws. It might help if he was also able to read English, though perhaps it is not essential. That one can understand *The Waste Land* without even trying is consoling news for all students of literature. Perhaps the same is true of the General Theory of Relativity. Maybe we are all nuclear physicists somewhere deep in our guts.

There is another reason why the idea of character as Balzac or Hawthorne knew it no longer seems feasible in modern times. This is because in an age of mass culture and commerce, human beings come to seem increasingly faceless and interchangeable. We can distinguish easily enough between Othello and Iago, but not between Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon. The characters of *The Waste Land*, as Eliot himself remarked, are not really distinct from one another. Leopold Bloom, as we have seen, is sharply individualised, yet he is also an anonymous Everyman whose thoughts and feelings could be almost anybody's. His mind is magnificently banal. Figures in Virginia Woolf tend to blur into each other, as feelings and sensations pass like vibrations from one individual to the next. It is becoming harder to identify the owner of a particular experience. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* contains characters of a sort, but like figures in a dream they seem perpetually to merge, split, dissolve and recombine, secreting within themselves a whole array of fractured selves and provisional identities. One might say of a good deal of modernist writing that the true protagonist is not this or that character, but language itself.

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We may now look at a particular literary character in rather more detail. Sue Bridehead of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* ranks among the most stunningly original portraits of a woman in Victorian fiction. Yet the novel lays a trap for the unwary reader. It is as though it deliberately tempts him to write Sue off as perverse, flirtatious and exasperatingly fickle, and many a reader has obediently fallen for the bait. As one sternly judgemental critic of Sue writes,

there isn't, when one comes down to it, much to be said in her defence. Having speeded on the death of her first lover, Sue captivates Jude to enjoy the thrill of being loved, and then enters with dubious motives and curiously mechanical detachment into marriage with Phillotson, treating Jude with astounding callousness in the process. Having refused to sleep with Phillotson she abandons him for Jude, temporarily wrecking the schoolmaster's career, and refuses to sleep with Jude too. She then agrees to marry him out of jealousy of Arabella, changes her mind, and finally returns again to Phillotson, leaving Jude to die . . . The problem is how we come to feel that Sue is more than just a perverse hussy, full of petty stratagems and provocative pouts; for that this is at one level an accurate description of her seems undeniable.

It may have seemed undeniable to me when I wrote these words some forty years ago in the Preface to the New Wessex edition of the novel, but they strike me today as woefully off the mark. Sue is not full of provocative pouts. She pouts once in the novel,

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unprovocatively. Neither is she a schemer, as the phrase 'full of petty stratagems' would suggest. It is not at all clear that she 'speeded on' the death of her first lover. He claims that she broke his heart, but the charge is pretty preposterous. Not many people die of this particular ailment, not least when they are gravely ill in any case, as Sue's first lover seems to have been. Nor does she treat Jude with 'astounding callousness'. It is not her fault that Phillotson is hounded out of his job. The passage is a tissue of untruths. If Sue were alive today, she could sue for defamation of character. She could, however, screw a lot more damages out of D.H. Lawrence, who brands her in his *Study of Thomas Hardy* as 'almost male', 'an 'old-woman type of witch' who adheres to the 'male principle' and is 'scarcely a woman at all'. Rather oddly, Lawrence also accuses her of being 'physically impotent'. So Sue is really a man, but a man who is not a real man. It is hard to get more sexually confused than that.

It is true (to do my younger self a spot of justice) that I proposed this version of Sue as only one possible reading. It is also true that she can be jealous, capricious and exasperatingly inconsistent. These, however, are hardly hanging offences. Much of Sue's behaviour makes sense once one sees that it is driven by a deep fear of sexuality. This is not because she is a Victorian prude, but for exactly the opposite reason. She is an enlightened young woman with boldly progressive views about marriage and sexuality. She is also something of a sceptic when it comes to religious belief. The irony is that she is wary of sexuality precisely because of her emancipated views. She regards marriage and sexuality as snares which rob women of their independence, and the novel itself fully supports her in this opinion. ' "Is it," [Jude] said, "that the women are to blame; or is it the artificial system of things, under which the

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normal sex-impulses are turned into devilish domestic gins and springes [that is, traps] to noose and hold back those who want to progress?"' (Whether anyone ever spoke like this in real life is another question.) If she tries to disavow her love for Jude, with calamitous consequences for them both, it is not because she is heartless but because she recognises that love in these social conditions is inseparable from oppressive power. Sexuality is about subjugation. As Hardy writes in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 'it is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs'.

If Sue finds it hard to commit herself to Jude, it is not because she is a flirt but because she values her freedom. She grew up, so we are told, as something of a tomboy; and this epicene or sexless quality, which puts her beyond the pale of conventional sexual behaviour, makes it hard for her to understand men's sexual feelings for her. She can thus hurt them without intending to. She would prefer simply to be their friends. The novel sees with extraordinary insight that the sexual institutions of late Victorian society have destroyed the possibility of comradeship between men and women. Some of Sue's apparent perversity springs from the fact that her advanced sexual views are inevitably somewhat theoretical. Women's emancipation is still at an early stage. So her beliefs can easily succumb to social pressures. She is thrown out of college for unbecoming conduct, and then, alarmed by the public outcry this occasions, tries to set matters right with respectable opinion by marrying the mildly repulsive Phillotson. The result is predictably disastrous.

Throughout the book, Sue has a dismally low estimate of herself. She is a far more admirable woman than she imagines, and the novel allows us to see the discrepancy between what she is really

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like and her own self-loathing. When an adopted child of Jude and Sue hangs their other children and then kills himself, an event which the novel does not even try to make realistically convincing, Sue's poor opinion of herself is pressed to a pathological extreme. 'I should like to prick myself all over with pins,' she cries, 'and bleed out the badness that's in me!' Convulsed by guilt and self-disgust, she abandons Jude and returns to Phillotson, leaving Jude to die wretched and alone. I note this fact in my Preface, but fail to mention that Sue leaves her partner for the most understandable of reasons. It is hardly surprising that a woman who has just lost her children in this grotesque manner, and who is in any case the target of vicious public censure, should take the death of her children as divine punishment for her bohemian way of life, and finally submit to moral orthodoxy. It is understandable not least because Sue's sexual emancipation is still embryonic and uncertain. It is a work in progress rather than an achieved position. How could it be otherwise when she is forced to go it alone, with no support from society at large and a good deal of prejudice and hostility to face down?

The tragedy of the novel is that Sue and Jude try to live out a form of comradeship, but are thwarted in the end by the power of patriarchy. Even a love as deep and steadfast as theirs is bent out of true by the system. 'Sexuality is blood-stained,' as one commentator on the book remarks. This superbly courageous novel is about the impossibility of sexuality, not just its pitfalls and illusions. Yet it refuses to accept that the couple's failure was somehow fated. It has nothing to do with Nature, Providence or a malevolent God. It is just that the experiment was premature. History was not yet ready for it. The same is true of Jude's ill-starred attempt to enter Oxford University as a working man. This project, too, was

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not doomed but before its time, as he himself comes to acknowledge. Not long after his death, a college for working people was established in Oxford, and still exists today. In any case, the novel suggests with cold-eyed realism that for its hero to try to break into the benighted set-up known as Oxford University was not worth the effort. Repairing the walls of the very colleges which shut him out, which is one of Jude's jobs, is more useful in Hardy's eyes than most of the learning that goes on within them.

One reason why it is easy for critics to see Sue as frigid and neurotic is that we view her largely through the eyes of others. We are not allowed much access to her from the inside. For much of the narrative, she exists as a function of Jude's experience, not as a character in her own right. If she seems so tantalisingly opaque, it is partly because she is filtered through the needs, desires and delusions of the protagonist. As one critic puts it, she is made the instrument of Jude's tragedy rather than the subject of her own. It is not surprising that after Jude's death she is no longer seen at all. To this extent, the novel itself is complicit in the sidelining of its heroine. But it is also extraordinarily perceptive in its presentation of her.

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Jude the Obscure invites us to sympathise with Sue Bridehead, but it also wants us to see how she escapes any simple understanding. If nobody in the novel itself can truly own her, the same is true of its readers. We are asked to feel for Sue, but not in a way that irons out her inconsistencies. Some of the book's other characters, including from time to time Jude himself, mistake her elusiveness for the eternal enigma of Woman. On the whole, however, the novel itself refuses this patronising viewpoint. Sue's 'mystery' springs largely

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from the complex, self-contradictory nature of sexuality in a social order which puts it to oppressive uses.

A good deal of realist fiction invites the reader to identify with its characters. We are supposed to feel what it is like to be someone else, even if we would not relish the thought of actually being them. By allowing us imaginatively to recreate the experience of other human beings, the realist novel broadens and deepens our human sympathies. In this sense, it is a moral phenomenon without actually having to moralise. It is moral, if you like, by virtue of its form, not just its content. George Eliot is a writer who does indeed moralise rather too much for modern taste, but she herself saw the novel form in just this light. 'The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings,' she writes in a letter, 'is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures.' For Eliot, the creative imagination is the opposite of egoism. It allows us to enter into the inner lives of others, rather than remaining sealed off from them in our own private spheres. The artistic is thus very close to the ethical. If only we could grasp the world from someone else's standpoint, we would have a fuller sense of how and why they act as they do. We would thus be less inclined to reproach them from some loftily external point of view. To understand is to forgive.

This charitable case has much to recommend it. But there is quite a lot wrong with it as well. For one thing, not all literary art invites us to identify with its characters. For another thing, empathy is not the only form of understanding. In fact, taken literally, it is not a form of understanding at all. If I 'become' you, I lose my faculty of knowing what you are like. Who is left over to do the

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understanding? Besides, are we supposed to empathise with nasty pieces of work like Dracula, or Mrs Norris in *Mansfield Park*? (There may be a few seriously bizarre people who would like nothing better than to be a vampire, but most of us would prefer to be Odysseus or Elizabeth Bennet.) Anyway, if I 'become' Hector or Homer Simpson, I can understand them only if they understand themselves, which seems far from true in Homer's case. D.H. Lawrence is especially sardonic about empathy in his *Studies in American Literature*. 'As soon as Walt [Whitman] knew a thing,' he writes, 'he assumed a One Identity with it. If he knew that an Eskimo sat in a kayak, immediately there was Walt being little and yellow and greasy, sitting in a kayak'. The critical point survives the casual racism.

Sophocles is not inviting us to empathise with Oedipus. The play expects us to feel pity for its doomed protagonist, but there is a difference between feeling for someone (sympathy) and feeling as them (empathy). If we merge ourselves imaginatively with Oedipus, how can we pass judgement on him? Yet this is surely an important part of what criticism involves. To judge involves holding something a little at arm's length, a move which is compatible with sympathy but not with empathy. The literary art of ancient Greece does not ask us to feel what it is like to have a spear through one's guts or a monster in one's womb. Instead, it puts characters and events on display for our appraisal. So does a neo-classical author like Henry Fielding. We are expected to observe Tom Jones with an amused, ironic, sympathetic eye, not climb into bed with him. There are quite enough people in bed with him already.

The Marxist dramatist Bertolt Brecht, writing in the age of Hitler, thought that empathising with characters on stage risked blunting our critical faculties. And this, he considered, was highly

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convenient for those in power. Empathy elevated sentiment over critical reason. As a Marxist, Brecht also believed that social existence was made up of contradictions, and that these contradictions went to the heart of people's identities. To show men and women as they really are is to show them as changeable, inconsistent and self-divided. The idea of character as unified and coherent struck Brecht as an illusion. It repressed the conflicts within the self which might make for social change. In one of his short stories, Herr Keuner, who has been absent from his village for many years, returns home, and is cheerfully informed by his neighbours that he hasn't changed a bit. 'Herr Keuner,' Brecht writes, 'turned white.' Behind Scott or Balzac's conception of character lies one kind of politics; behind Brecht's lies another. He was the only man in history who was banned from the Danish communist party before he had applied to join.

If imaginative sympathy is only one way of approaching character, it also has some more general limitations. The phrase 'the creative imagination' is one which almost everyone on the planet seems to find unequivocally positive, like 'We're off to Marrakesh tomorrow' or 'Have another Guinness.' But the imagination is by no means unambiguously positive. Serial killing requires a fair amount of imagination. The imagination is able to project all kinds of dark, diseased scenarios as well as a great many affirmative ones. Every lethal weapon ever invented was the result of an act of imagination. The imagination is thought to be among the noblest of human faculties, but it is also unnervingly akin to fantasy, which is generally ranked among the lowest.

In any case, trying to feel what you are feeling will not necessarily improve my moral character. A sadist likes to know what his victim is feeling. Someone may need to know how you are feeling

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in order to exploit you more effectively. The Nazis did not kill Jews because they could not identify with what they were feeling. They did not care what they were feeling. I cannot experience the pains of childbirth, but this does not mean that I am callously indifferent to someone who does. Morality has precious little to do with feeling in any case. The fact that you feel a surge of nausea at the sight of someone with half their head shot away is neither here nor there as long as you try to help them. Conversely, feeling intense compassion for someone who has just fallen down a manhole, while nipping down a side-street to avoid having to haul him out, will not win you many humanitarian prizes.

Literature is sometimes thought of as a 'vicarious' mode of experience. I cannot know what it feels like to be a skunk, but a gripping short story with a skunk at its centre might allow me to overcome my restrictions in this respect. But there is no particular value in knowing what it feels like to be a skunk. Acts of imagination are not precious in themselves. It is not testimony to my sublime creativity that I spend most of the day trying to imagine what it would feel like to be a vacuum cleaner. It does not feel like anything to be a vacuum cleaner. Nor is the imaginary always to be preferred to the real. To suppose that it should be, as some Romantics do, implies a curiously negative attitude to everyday reality. It suggests that what does not exist is always more glamorous or alluring than what does. This may be true if you are thinking of Donald Trump, but not if you are thinking of Nelson Mandela.

There is no doubt that we can usefully extend our experience by reading works of literature. It is just that this can also be a way of compensating for deficiencies that might be set right for real. Those with enough money and leisure, for example, can explore the mountainous region between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Most

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people on the planet lack the resources to enjoy this experience, and are reluctant to join al-Qa'ida in order to have it for free. They must settle for reading travel books instead. If wealth were shared more equally, however, a lot more people might be able to swarm over the area, provided they were willing to risk getting shot. One advantage of reading a Lonely Planet guidebook on the place is that nobody is likely to plug you with a bullet for doing so. In the nineteenth century, literature was sometimes recommended to the working classes as a way of feeling what it was like to ride to hounds or marry a viscount, since they were not able to do these things in reality. There have been more persuasive arguments for why poems and novels are worth reading.