

4. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Jerome Buckley (New York: Norton, 1990), 9.
5. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. George Levine (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 76–77.
6. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
7. Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).



## Character

JILL GALVAN

THE scholarly story of Victorian character has long been a story of interiority. According to Deidre Lynch’s influential account, by the end of the eighteenth century, print consumers were stratified by their approach to character: reading with taste (distinctly from the masses) meant reading for interpretable insides.<sup>1</sup> Ian Watt’s classic history of the novel presumes a dense psychology in describing the novelistic individual as a modern subject navigating the choices of her socioeconomic world.<sup>2</sup> Readings premised on psychological conflict likewise assume innerness. Since the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for instance, it hardly seems possible *not* to read a character like Jane Eyre as riven by deep selfhood.<sup>3</sup>

But in recent scholarship, another story is emerging. Broadly speaking, this newer work emphasizes character as a dynamically relational form: a mobile entity shaped by interaction—whether with the reader, other characters in the storyworld, or both. Character here is experiential in a nearly physical sense—a matter of movement, perception, and change. It exists formally or phenomenologically, in time and space. An early inkling of this approach is Alex Woloch’s *The One Vs. the Many*, which reads fictional persons as jostling for space and for the reader’s limited attention within a crowded “character-system.”<sup>4</sup> More recently, S. Pearl Brilmyer interprets *Middlemarch*’s characters as soft, mutable beings with attributes emerging from their encounters in a

material field.<sup>5</sup> A key concept for Brilmyer is affect—felt, sensory phenomena—and this is also the basis of Summer Star’s reading of *Middlemarch*’s realism: George Eliot’s peopled environment seems genuine because of readers’ “liminally conscious perception that moment to moment draws us to the object world and substantiates belonging to it as fellow, bodily objects.”<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Farina’s study of character, while concerned with prose turns of phrase rather than material spatiality, also ties nineteenth-century fictional personhood to form and affect. For writers ranging from Jane Austen to Anthony Trollope, he suggests, character was a relational style comprising both people and things; selves, inextricable from objects, acquired moral and emotional value through a performative mode that was supple, tactile, frictional, alive with “frisson.”<sup>7</sup>

With their attention to character as an experience of contact, such perspectives put pressure on the idea of interiority. Indeed, in a tangential trend, other critics have questioned the individual’s private outlines, claiming, rather, intersubjectivity or a blending with (social or natural) surroundings. This latter work, too, has a strong phenomenological bent. David Kurnick suggests that in reading the novel as a genre defined by interiority, critics have overlooked its yearning for the collective, external space of the theater and thus its “fundamental ambiguity” about the “public/private distinction.”<sup>8</sup> Rachel Ablow’s book on Victorian pain argues for the “impersonality” of this most troubling of affects. Pain’s ontological incommunicability is a means for authors to navigate, and sometimes transcend, the distinction between self and other.<sup>9</sup> In an essay linking *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* to psychoanalytical object-relations theory, Alicia Christoff sees Thomas Hardy’s protagonist as “diffuse and dissolved” and her solitary moments as inclusive of other presences, not unlike the experience of the novel-reader herself.<sup>10</sup>

But perhaps the most provocative new views of fictional personhood are those that, more than simply tempering a notion of innerness, emphatically deny its existence. Brilmyer proposes that the typical *Middlemarch* character is not, as has often been thought, a “hidden or buried kernel of personality, but instead . . . a socially determined material figuration.”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, this denial also appears in the work of recent modernist scholars. In general, in fact, there has been a remarkable overlap between Victorian and modernist theories of narrated selves. Certain concepts—non-individuation, embodied experience, affective relation, and the difference between interiority/depth and exteriority/surface—are cropping up in both. For Rochelle Rives, drawing on

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, modernist authors turn away from “humanist” models of discrete psychology, implying the “impersonality” of the encounter and its emotional, ethical, and political potentialities. Rives puts this in dramatically spatial terms: rejecting the belief that “humans have depths to be plumbed or expressed,” modernist authors imagine interaction on a “flatten[ed]” “surface” that “exteriorizes collective emotional experience.”<sup>12</sup> Omri Moses stresses the modernist (e.g., Bergsonian) fascination with vitalism—living interconnection and flux—to offer, similarly, an account wherein ethics arise from momentary, affective responses. Most relevantly here, he asserts a difference between this dynamic state of being and static Victorian personality. Whereas Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and T. S. Eliot envision character as situational and processual, George Eliot’s selves are “centered” and limited in moral action by the “unity and orderliness” of their social environment.<sup>13</sup>

But as is apparent from the stimulating Victorianist criticism surveyed above, such distinctions are misleading—though also entirely predictable, given the way English studies often charts the course of literature. Moses’s account is tacitly one of aesthetic progression: in the twentieth century, fiction outgrows its faith in coherent selves, becoming more attentive to the vagaries and perplexities of existence, as well as the flexibility of temporal, spatial, and (hence) narrative form. Scholars often note that historical periodization risks obscuring valuable insights. And yet on the topic of aesthetics and representation, the distinction between Victorianism and modernism seems intransigent, often, as in this case, to the diminution of the former.

In recent studies of character, however, I see an opportunity to jettison the idea of progression and to trace cross-period resonances instead. As this work highlights, questions of social ethics, often associated with Victorian literature, do not mutually exclude attention to perceptual and sensual form, often associated with modernist literature. Aiding this reconciliation is the affective turn in both subfields. Intriguingly, Kristy Martin’s book on the “rhythms of sympathy,” though focused on modernist authors, includes George Eliot in the introduction, demonstrating the disciplinary bridge in even this most seemingly quintessential of Victorian affects. For Martin, sympathy—here theorized, like Moses’s character, through a discourse of vitalism—moves between, and therefore disturbs the boundaries of, individuals. Its ethic involves not deliberation or “autonomy” but instead “sensuous and epiphanic” feeling.<sup>14</sup> I’d suggest that with all this attention to vital dynamism, the fiction of individuality, and the interrelation of people with their surroundings,

we are witnessing in both subfields a phenomenologically posthuman shift: a serious consideration of how we might read characters and their shared embodiment in light of the fallacies of liberal humanism.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, paradoxical as it may seem, I'd urge that scholars not abandon the concept of interiority altogether, as simply synonymous with determined psychological identity. For on the contrary, the new physicalist view of character accentuates interiority (or depth) as itself a dimensional concept, and that we can read its interrelational position in multiple productive ways.<sup>16</sup> Contact between persons may well entail an experience of continuity. But, as narratives from *Middlemarch* (and prior) on through *To the Lighthouse* (and afterward) also depict, that moment of contact just as often entails an impression of isolation, misunderstanding, difference: a sense of separate insiderness, necessarily opaque or exterior from the perspective of someone else. This, too, is a significant feeling. It is also significant aesthetically, as a matter of perception and point of view. "She could be herself, by herself," Mrs. Ramsay thinks, in Woolf's novel. "Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep, but now and again, we rise to the surface, and that is what you see us by."<sup>17</sup> Part of what fascinates readers about Mrs. Ramsay, as about Dorothea Brooke, or any number of Victorian characters, is the lived impermeability of that surface—mysterious, sometimes socially troublesome—even as she flexes, vitally, ethically, to her narrative environment.

#### NOTES

1. Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).
2. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).
3. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
4. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 14.
5. S. Pearl Brilmyer, "Plasticity, Form, and the Matter of Character in *Middlemarch*," *Representations* 130, no. 1 (2015): 60–83.
6. Summer J. Star, "Feeling Real in *Middlemarch*," *ELH* 80, no. 3 (2013): 839–69, 842.
7. Jonathan Farina, *Everyday Words and the Character of Prose in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 20.

8. David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 3.
9. Rachel Ablow, *Victorian Pain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 3.
10. Alicia Christoff, "Alone with *Tess*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 48, no. 1 (2015): 18–44, 25.
11. Brillmyer, "Plasticity," 71.
12. Rochelle Rives, *Modernist Impersonalities: Affect, Authority, and the Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 8, 14.
13. Omri Moses, *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 6, 9.
14. Kristy Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7, 10.
15. This upshot has generally been indirect, though some critics, e.g., Ablow and Rives, consider liberalism and humanism explicitly.
16. For other accounts of the spatiality of depth hermeneutics, in response to recent critical dismissals of it, see Deanna Kreisel, "The Madwoman on the Third Story: *Jane Eyre* in Space," *PMLA* 131, no. 1 (2016): 101–15, and Zachary Samalin, "Plumbing the Depths, Scouring the Surface: Henry Mayhew's Scavenger Hermeneutics," *New Literary History* 48, no. 2 (2017): 387–410.
17. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1981), 62.



## Child

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“ONE must have a heart of stone,” Oscar Wilde allegedly quipped, “to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.” It’s odd that so many of us know this *bon mot*, since it comes to us not from Wilde himself, but from a second-hand recollection of a conversation with him reported thirty years after he died.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps we’ve embraced this epigram not just because it’s funny, but also because we like to think of Wilde as a witty iconoclast who anticipates our own skepticism about