# Character

JONATHAN FARINA

"CHARACTER" for most of the nineteenth century primarily denominated neither persons (fictional or real) nor moral integrity but the epistemic and aesthetic object of prose, a distinct form of knowledge and style of representation marked by a recognizable set of colloquial signatures. To be sure, fictional and real personages were commonly and conspicuously the subjects of characterization, and such personages were in turn often the vehicles for promoting various moral values, including the modesty, perseverance, thrift, responsibility, industry, and liberal individualism that Samuel Smiles describes as character in his best-selling *Self-Help* (1859) and *Character* (1871). The predominance of the novel has, however, overshadowed how "character" named a more comprehensive form of representation that also played remarkable roles in other discourses and genres. In these discourses, characterization afforded legitimate, sympathetic form to abstractions and objects that might have otherwise appeared alienating, immoral, impersonal, or uninteresting.

Victorian writings about natural history, geology, architecture, painting, furniture and the decorative arts, sculpture, and fashion manifestly show that Victorians were as comfortable as we are ascribing "character" to things other than people and that such things were not always deemed to be metonymically related to the character of their owners. Given the prevalence of free indirect discourse and psychological realism, interiority and depth have dominated critical analyses of character, and certainly the epistemology of depth intersects with the epistemology of character. Deidre Lynch reinvigorated the study of character by attending to the etymology of the word as a mark, like a line of William Hogarth's caricature, which limns the balance between individuality and typicality, caricature and deep character.[1] But Lynch's book traces the incorporation of such marks—in various prose techniques—into a social economy that traded in depth and that restricts "character" to the interiority of personages. "Character" was not synonymous with depth; for Victorians it was indexed by a wider range of rhetorical forms.

The natural historical connotation of character exemplifies how the category worked across a range of domains. As Michel Foucault explains, "the character, as established by natural history," marks selected organic features not because they most aptly distinguish the essence or identity of

an organism but because they make "it possible both to indicate the individual and to situate it in a space of generalities that fit inside one another."[2] Victorian philosophical debates about classification reinforce the resonance of character as a category of knowledge outside of fiction and moral philosophy and affirm how characters signified not merely the identity or essential interiority of an organism but instead its sociality and relationality. Characters, understood this way, concurrently articulate the individuality and collective belonging of an organism.

Of course fictional personages have names, gestures, objects, bodies, and expressions that similarly individuate and generalize them. Thus the British writers most known for their production of character—William Shakespeare, Walter Scott, and Charles Dickens—were routinely praised by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Hazlitt, W. H. Horne and others for composing personages who were both individuals and types. The correlation between character and individuality and typicality animated writings by William Whewell, John Stuart Mill, and others who promoted induction by appraising its effect on character. Such debates insisted upon the especial Englishness of induction, as if remediating particularity and generality was a national trait distinctly redolent of Francis Bacon and Shakespeare. John Herschel, like Whewell, explicitly describes induction as a moral habit of "ascent" that cultivates the character of the scientist even as it legitimated the creditability of his prose. Iterations of "particular" and "general" seem to effect this moral work.

I elsewhere write at length about an array of additional rhetorical signatures that Victorians registered as "character."[3] These signatures include the word "turn" as it signified a trope, an affective shock, a rhetorical change of topic, an histrionic gesture, a rote industrial or mechanical movement, and a summary moral accounting. "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life," *David Copperfield* famously begins;[4] and "Under nature, the slightest differences of structure or constitution may well turn the nicely-balanced scale in the struggle for life," Darwin writes in the *Origin of Species*.[5] From *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* to *The Descent of Man*, the character of Victorian prose as much as the character of its personages depends on consistent recourse to "turns" that reject stasis, ignore depth, and evoke liberal, dynamic, and emotive interest.

Character was also realized in a recurrent "as if," which signals an investment in conjectural analogy as an alternative to empirical, referential fact in discourses as diverse as the new geology of Charles Lyell, the fiction of Dickens, and the physics of John Tyndall. Likewise, a recurrent "but" indexes a constitutive hypocrisy and penchant for

friction in a legal system that was routinizing witness rebuttal and in fiction like Trollope's that so routinizes skepticism that it disarms and translates it into reparative recognition rather than criticism. The texture of Trollope's prose is characterized, in every sense of the word, by adversatives like "and yet" that install discord so diffusely and profusely that, as reviews have consistently attested, it appears as a kind of gentlemanly "ease" instead of a kind of provocation, disclosure, suspicion, or radical skepticism. Prose with character is moreover marked by a penchant for pronouns without clear antecedents or referents, pronouns like "something" and "that sort of thing" that for writers like George Eliot instantiate an otherwise ineffable interiority but also betray a frustrating lack of clarity. The character of prose depends precisely on the liberal, gestural relation to reality that underwrites the delineation of both Dorothea Brooke and her bumbling uncle.

Alex Woloch has recharged the study of character with a canny Marxist reading of how depth of character emerges spatially as a function of the subordination of secondary characters, whose relative marginalization creates the effect of protagonicity.[6] Respecting the claims of nineteenth-century critics, for whom character was a necessary if unstable heuristic category, we should open up this character space to things other than personages, to see character as the object of a specific prose style or texture and the knowledge it affects to produce rather than as a property of its subjects. Characterization, distinct from the tropes of mimetic realism with which it is so often interwoven, consistently presents its world aslant as the product of turns, conjectures, inductions, rebuttals, abstractions, and deferrals from the evident. This broader character space also had its politics: characterization afforded prose what Steven Shapin calls "epistemic decorum," the requisite manners and moral signatures of credible truth, even as it rejected transparency.[7]

## Notes

1. Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.
2. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 159.
3. Jonathan Farina, *Everyday Words and the Character of Prose in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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.[1] 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.[2] Readings premised on psychical 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.[3]

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."[4] More recently, S. Pearl Brilmyer interprets *Middlemarch*'s characters as soft, mutable beings with attributes emerging from their encounters in a