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Alex Woloch: The One vs. the Many

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Introduction

Characterization and Distribution

They told him there were too many characters
in your novel, that the plot was still complicated, but still
they keep coming on, there must have been a leak, wait, it's not even that,
there are just too many people out there.

—John Ashbery, “The Last Romantic”

“*Done because we are too menny.*”

—Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*

Character-Space: Between Person and Form

Lykaon, Thersites, Achilles, Diomedes, Odysseus, the anonymous men fleetingly registered in the Catalogue of Ships: over and over again we are presented with different inflections of individuals into the total work of art. The rich diversity of these characters—the multitudinous ways in which the *Iliad* comprehends the human—depends on each character’s structured position within the literary totality, or the narrative space that he occupies. In each instance, the character’s referential personality—the unique sense and abiding impression that the character leaves us with—emerges in-and-through, not despite, his textual position and the descriptive configuration that flows out from this position.

“Now wol I stynte of Palamon a lite,” writes Chaucer in “The Knight’s Tale,” registering the way that narrative progress always entails a series of choices: each moment magnifies some characters while turning away from—and thus diminishing or even stinting—others.¹ Such a process runs implicitly through any number of narratives and occasionally breaks out to the surface of the fiction itself. Consider these two quotations from Dostoevsky and Trollope. First, from *The Idiot*:

Let us not forget that the motives behind human actions are usually infinitely more complicated and various than we assume them to be . . . do as we will, we are now under the absolute necessity of devoting to this secondary character in our story rather more space and attention than we originally had intended. (502)

And, from *Barchester Towers*, at the very end of chapter 3:

Mr. Slope, however, on his first introduction must not be brought before the public at the tail of a chapter. (21)

Both of these passages explicitly render the novel's own awareness of the amount of narrative space allocated to a particular character. Squeezing a character into the end of a chapter creates a tension between our sense of the character as an actual human placed within an imagined world and the space of the character within the narrative structure. Trollope's example—a character who is too important to get pushed into the end of a chapter—is expanded into a general principle by Dostoevsky: *all* characters are potentially overdelimited within the fictional world—and might disrupt the narrative if we pay them the attention they deserve.²

Dostoevsky focuses on that gap between what he calls “motive” and “action”—or between the interior thoughts of a human being (which are “infinitely” complicated) and the finite, limited manifestation of this consciousness through external, social actions. If the narrative registers only action, it will elide the perspective of characters; if it attempts to register motive, it might lose the thread of narrative progression and have to devote too much “space and attention” to minor characters. That two novelists who represent such different extremes of nineteenth-century realism as Dostoevsky and Trollope share a similar ground for their systems of characterization speaks to the importance of this narrative process.

Trollope's comment about Mr. Slope and the tail of a chapter is so suggestive because it relies *both* on our ability to imagine a character as though he were a real person, who exists outside of the parameters of the novel, and on our awareness of such a highly artificial and formal aspect of the narrative structure as chapter divisions. The character-space marks the *intersection* of an implied human personality—that is, as Dostoevsky says, “infinitely” complex—with the definitively circumscribed form of a narrative. It is the point where Mr. Slope can meet the “tail of a chapter.” In this perspective the implied person behind any character is never directly reflected in the literary text but only partially inflected: each individual portrait has a radically contingent position within the story as a whole; our sense of the human figure (*as* implied person) is inseparable from the space that he or she occupies within the narrative totality.

The One vs. the Many seeks to redefine literary characterization in terms of this distributional matrix: how the discrete representation of any specific individual is intertwined with the narrative's continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe. We have seen how the dynamic flux of attention underlies important incidents and narrative strategies in the *Iliad*. Both the distorted physical description of Thersites and the partial, but ultimately elided, inscription of Lykaon's point of view flow out of the distributional pressures that inform these scenes. These examples are not rare. My study addresses and connects a series of questions that have never been conceptually formulated but that are provoked by, and often essential to, any number of narratives. What is the purpose or significance of a particularly marginal character? How much access are we

given to a certain character's thoughts, and how does the partial enactment of this perspective or point of view fit into the narrative as a whole? Why and how are certain narratives divided between two or three central characters? How often, at what point, and for what duration does a character appear in the text? How does she enter and exit specific scenes? How does her delimited position intersect with the achieved representation of her speech, actions, or physiognomy? How are her appearances positioned in relation to other characters and to the thematic and structural totality of the narrative? Why does a particular character suddenly disappear from the narrative or abruptly begin to gain more narrative attention? How does the text organize a large number of different characters within a unified symbolic and structural system? As these questions flow into each other, I will begin to construct a new framework for interpreting both characterization itself—the literary representation of imagined human beings—and the design and significance of a number of nineteenth-century novels. My interpretive method rests above all in the combination of two new narratological categories which I will formulate and continually return to: the *character-space* (that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole) and the *character-system* (the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure). In developing these categories through a series of nineteenth-century novels, I want to demonstrate the importance of distributed attention not just to the realist novel but to the vexed problem of characterization itself: a problem that lies at the heart of contemporary literary theory.

Characterization and the Antinomies of Theory

The literary character: so important to narrative praxis but ever more imperiled within literary theory. For a long time now, characterization has been the *bête noire* of narratology, provoking either cursory dismissal, lingering uncertainty, or vociferous argument. As Jonathan Culler writes, “Character is the major aspect of the novel to which structuralism has paid least attention and has been least successful in treating” (230). Other narrative theorists concur:

It is remarkable how little has been said about the theory of character in literary history and criticism. (Chatman, 107)

Whereas the study of the story's events and the links among them has been developed considerably in contemporary poetics, that of character has not. Indeed, the elaboration of a systematic, non-reductive but also non-impressionistic theory of character remains one of the challenges poetics has not yet met. (Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 29)

That no one has yet succeeded in constructing a complete and coherent theory of character is probably precisely because of this human aspect. The character is not a human being, but it resembles one. (Bal, 80)

Rimmon-Kenan's opposition between the "impressionistic" and the "systematic" signals the crux of a problem that characterization has posed within narrative theory. How does an interpretive practice that focuses on the syntax of narrative *as* a system conceptualize the implied resemblance between "the character" and "the human being"? Focusing on the character-system—and the character-spaces that it encompasses and puts into relation—highlights the way that the "human aspect" of a character is often dynamically integrated into, and sometimes absorbed by, the narrative structure as a whole. As this study will demonstrate, character-space draws on and redefines our understanding of both "impression" and "system," continually establishing a relationship between the referential elaboration of a character, as implied individual, and the emplacement of a character within a coordinated narrative structure.

By analyzing the distribution of attention within narrative, we can thus reconfigure a seemingly implacable conflict within theories of characterization: the tension between the authenticity of a character in-and-of-himself and the reduction of the character into the thematic or symbolic field. Harry Berger aptly summarizes such a problem in Spenser: "When the poet states or suggests that Woman A stands for Idea B, a dilemma is forced on us. Does Woman A disappear completely into Idea B? . . . Or is such sleight of hand impossible to a poet—doesn't a fable by its very nature have some elements of concreteness (belonging to the 'image of human life') that cannot be translated?" (120).³ Mieke Bal's stress on the problematic "human aspect" of characterization comes out of a particular and highly influential perspective on this tension within twentieth-century literary theory. Beginning with the Russian formalists, the decoupling of literary characters from their implied humanness becomes the price of entry into a theoretical perspective on characterization. For instance, Boris Tomachevski analyzes the hero not as the central *person* whose story the literary text elaborates, but rather as a central device that acts as glue for the text itself, "a sort of living support for the text's different motifs." Tomachevski continues:

The hero is hardly necessary to the story. The story, as a system of motifs, can entirely bypass the hero and his characteristic traits. The hero comes out of the transformation of the material in the discourse and represents, in one part, a means to tie together the motifs and, in another part, a personified motivation for the connection between the motifs. . . . The hero is necessary so that one can tie together anecdotes around him. (293–98)

French structuralists, poststructuralists, and new novelists return to and elaborate Russian formalism, arguing, even more insistently, against the anthropo-

morphic component of characterization. The attack on reference gets implicated in more ambitious schemes, whether ideological (Hélène Cixous and Alain Robbe-Grillet), hermeneutic/semantic (A. J. Greimas and Philippe Hamon), or both (Roland Barthes).⁴ Thus while Cixous and others argue that the referential basis of character underlies a particularly bourgeois notion of personhood, Greimas tries to show that our very cognition of characters is mediated through syntactic structures. Building on the earlier work of Vladimir Propp, Greimas categorizes all characters within an “actantial” model, according to six positional functions that are homologous to syntactic elements.⁵

This model of criticism has both relied on, and continually generated, an opposed perspective on characterization, which defines characters by their referential aspect. While formalists and New Critics attacked the psychological and moralistic basis of character-criticism, some recent studies have been increasingly troubled by the excision of the human from narratology.⁶ Throughout the twentieth century, analysis of character repeatedly seems to devolve into polemics, where both sides ironically depend on the viewpoint that they are dismissing. Such divisions fall into the more endemic alternations—and altercations—between intrinsic and extrinsic criticism that have been identified by Paul de Man and others as a kind of metastructure of twentieth-century literary theory.⁷

Let me present two polemical passages that illustrate the nature of this division: on the one hand, L. C. Knights’s famous 1933 attack on Shakespearean character-criticism (“How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?”); and, on the other hand, Irving Howe’s more recent broadside against the poststructuralist attack on literary character:

To examine the historical development of that kind of criticism which is mainly concerned with “character” is to strengthen the case against it. . . . Wherever we look we find the same reluctance to master the words of the play, the same readiness to abstract a character and treat him (because he is more manageable that way) as a human being. . . . The habit of regarding Shakespeare’s persons as “friends for life” or, maybe, “deceased acquaintances,” is responsible for most of the vagaries that serve as Shakespeare criticism. . . . Not only do we lose the necessary aloofness from a work of art (to be distinguished from an inability to respond imaginatively) but we lose the dramatic pattern and we are inhibited from the full complex response which a play of Shakespeare’s can evoke. (Knights, 11 and 27–28)

The sophisticated if just barely readable French theorist Hélène Cixous writes that a novel with mimetic characters turns into “a machine of repression,” bourgeois repression of course, since it presents a historical given as if it were everlasting and thereby thwarts all hope for transcendence. . . . There is something bizarre in the notion that fictional characterization is an agency of repression . . . this is to confuse narrative conventions with social categories. Where, in any case, have our strongest visions of possibility, as also our most telling social criticisms, come from if not the great

novelists—it is they who have given imaginative substance to what the young Marx called “the human essence,” and far better and more fully than any social theorists. . . . The great fictional characters, from Robinson Crusoe to Flem Snopes, from Tess to Molly Bloom, cannot quite be “fitted” into or regarded solely as functions of narrative. *Why should we want to?* What but the delusions of system and total grasp do we gain thereby? Such characters are too interesting, too splendidly mysterious for mere functional placement. (Howe, 38 and 42)

These two starkly contrasting—and equally convincing—perspectives are typical of theoretical positions about characters: both Howe and Knights are urging the reader to *choose*. Ironically, the formalist and referential positions seem to rely on each other—both are generated only through the opposed position, which they configure into an extreme in order to reverse. Thus such debates circle around and around; as de Man argues “an undeniable and recurrent historical fact . . . this sort of thing happens, again and again, in literary studies” (*Allegories* 3–4).

In viewing these contrary positions as dialectically linked and strangely dependent upon each other, we can begin to see a single opposition—or antinomy—that structures and gives form to seemingly distinct, and irreconcilable, points of view. Characterization has been such a divisive question in twentieth-century literary theory—and has created recurrent disputes between humanist and structural (or mimetic and formal) positions—because the literary character is itself divided, always emerging at the juncture between structure and reference. In other words, a literary *dialectic* that operates dynamically within the narrative text gets transformed into a theoretical *contradiction*, presenting students of literature with an unpalatable choice: language *or* reference, structure *or* individuality. My study recasts theoretical conflict back into literary process. By interpreting the character-system as a distributed field of attention, we make the tension between structure and reference generative of, and integral to, narrative signification. The opposition between the character as an individual and the character as part of a structure dissolves in this framework, as distribution relies *on* reference and takes place *through* structure.⁸ Thus the dimensions of both structure and reference—the scope of a complex, organizing formal system and the compelling human singularity of fictional individuals—become available to each other, rather than remaining mutually exclusive.

To link structure and reference in this way, in terms of distribution, brings out an inherently social dimension to narrative form as such. This socioformal dimension of a narrative is qualitatively distinct from (even if often related to) any social interactions that we might derive or extrapolate outside of the form, in the referenced social conflicts and relations between posited or implied persons within the imagined world of the story itself. For the character-system offers not simply many *interacting* individuals but many *intersecting* character-spaces, each of which encompasses an *embedded* interaction between the

discretely implied person and the dynamically elaborated narrative form. While characters themselves might or might not gain a relationship, character-spaces inevitably do.⁹ To put this differently, all character-spaces inevitably point us toward the character-system, since the emplacement of a character within the narrative form is largely comprised *by* his or her relative position vis-à-vis other characters. If the character-space frames the dynamic interaction between a discretely implied individual and the overall narrative form, the character-system comprehends the mutually constituting interactions among all the character-spaces as they are (simultaneously) developed within a specific narrative. None of these characters get elaborated in a vacuum, even if the particular configuration of a specific character can tempt the reader to consider him outside of or extract him from the coordinated narrative. There is never a *purely* isolated conflict between one character and the form—as in the image of Mr. Slope clashing against the edge of a chapter. Rather, the space of a particular character emerges only vis-à-vis the other characters who crowd him out or potentially revolve around him. It is precisely here that the social dimension of form emerges, revolving around the inflection rather than the simple reflection of characters.

This socioformal organization of individuals within the character-system allows us to approach the tension between representing and allegorizing *in terms of* the tension between focusing on one life and focusing on many. Thus, for example, A. Bartlett Giamatti, discussing perhaps the most traditional structure for elaborating a literary hero, argues that “[e]pic poems focus on that core of experience where our humanity is defined by the opposites it encompasses” (74–75). Facilitating this arrangement, a narrative can organize its discursive universe into a referential core—the central condition of the protagonist—and a symbolic field that elaborates and nuances this core: the peripheral representations of minor characters. Secondary characters—representing delimited extremes—*become* allegorical, and this allegory is directed toward a singular being, the protagonist, who stands at the center of the text’s symbolic structure, or what Giamatti calls “the single and abiding visionary core.”¹⁰ Giamatti’s version of the epic hero is far from incidental. The tension between the one and the many intrudes continually upon theories of epic poetics, which anticipate and lay the ground for questions of characterization that the realist novel will later face. Building on Giamatti’s comments, we might consider the debate between single-plot and multiplot narrative that dominates Italian Renaissance literary criticism. William W. Ryding describes this argument in terms of two warring literary genres: holistic, often allegorical, texts that are embedded in the defensive unitarian framework of late medieval Christianity, and epic romances which privilege discrete and heterogeneous narrative strands that stem from, reflect on, and forward secularizing trends. The most influential criticism in this period attempts to establish a relationship between unity and heterogeneity, deriving an aesthetics that draws on the merits of both

competing tendencies. Ryding distinguishes Tasso's synthetic approach to the dilemma between the parts and the whole "as by far the most lucid and thoughtful of those written during this period" (10). For Tasso, the epic poem, like the universe itself, is "a complex piece of machinery in which every gear and lever performs a necessary function with respect to the whole. Take out a part or change its position, and the machine is destroyed" (15). Tasso thus tries to construct an aesthetic framework at once heterogeneous and unified, and this model hinges precisely on the strength of *functionality*. Diverse "parts" can enter into a narrative, but only as they bear a useful relationship to a central whole. The very emergence of heterogeneity in Tasso's aesthetic rests conditionally on a countervailing process of function, or symbolic integration.¹¹

This tension between the one and the many becomes particularly pressing in the realist novel, which has always been praised for two contradictory generic achievements: depth psychology and social expansiveness, depicting the interior life of a singular consciousness and casting a wide narrative gaze over a complex social universe. The novel's commitment to everyday life promotes an inclusive, extensive narrative gaze, while its empiricist aesthetics highlights the importance and authenticity of ordinary human interiority. In his canonical account of the connection between the English novel and the turn toward everyday life, Ian Watt describes a broad historical relationship between realist aesthetics and larger cultural and philosophical tendencies: "[B]oth the philosophical and the literary innovations must be seen as parallel manifestations of a larger change—that vast transformation of Western civilization since the Renaissance which has replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one—one which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places" (31). The redundant profusion of "particulars" in Watt's sentence subtly illustrates the formal problem that arises out of the process he describes: once you are committed to "particularity," how do you curtail it? As Roland Barthes writes, "nothing could indicate why we should halt the details of the description here and not there; if it were not subject to an aesthetic or rhetorical choice, any 'view' would be inexhaustible by discourse: there would always be a corner, a detail, an inflection of space or color to report" ("Reality Effect," 145). Recasting Barthes's "reality effect," I want to argue that the realist novel is structurally destabilized not by too many details or colors or corners, but by *too many people*. It is the claim of individuals who are incompletely pulled into the narrative that lies behind the larger empirical precision of realist aesthetics.¹² As the logic of social inclusiveness becomes increasingly central to the novel's form—with the development of eighteenth-century empiricism and nineteenth-century omniscient social realism—this problem becomes more pressing. The novel gets infused with an awareness of its potential to *shift* the narrative focus away from an established center, toward minor characters.

In this inclusiveness, the realist novel never ceases to make allegorical (or functional) use of subordinate characters, but it does ferociously problematize such allegory, by more clearly and insistently putting it in juxtaposition with reference. Allegorical characterization now comes at a price: the price of the human particularity that it elides. In other words, the realist novel systematically reconfigures its own allegorical reduction of characters through a pervasive awareness of the distributional matrix. This awareness lies behind the “flatness” that E. M. Forster so insightfully conceptualizes: a flatness that would seem to go against the basic tenets of realism but, in fact, becomes essential to realism.¹³ Flatness simultaneously renders subordinate characters allegorical and, in its compelling distortions, calls attention to the subordination that underlies allegory. Flat characters—or the flattening of characters—becomes a primary site for the dialectic *between* reference and allegory that is generated out of the distributional matrix.

If many previous genres flatten subordinate characters—highlighting the tension between allegory and reference—the omniscient novel is particularly conscious of this narrative process, integrating its awareness into the narrative fabric. Nineteenth-century realism—with its mobile and often impersonal narrators, its ambitions toward structural totality, and its commitment to an inclusive social representation—generates endless varieties of interaction between the discursive organization of minor and central characters and the essential social and aesthetic impulses of the genre as a whole. Here the very formal terms of the socionarrative matrix—inclusion and exclusion, hierarchy and stratification, abstraction, utility, functionality and effacement—are continually manifested as themes, concerns and “stories” of the novels themselves. It is often precisely in the interaction between character-spaces (rather than merely in the characters or stories themselves) that novels touch history—not least because the very dynamic tension between reference and structure is itself so socially significant, grounded in the problematic elimination or functionalized compression of real persons in the actual world. This is one reason why nineteenth-century social realism is a key literary site—perhaps the key site—for highlighting and conceptualizing character-system and character-space. On the one hand, the realist novel’s mimetic ambitions and narrative strategies crystallize the referential stakes so often at play in the dynamic intersection of implied person and narrative form. On the other hand, social representation itself, which is so often stigmatized for an aesthetics of transparency that seeks to transcend or abolish form, emerges through the lens of character-space as an intricately and profoundly formal process. My readings of Austen, Dickens, and Balzac will offer more textured demonstrations of how crucial formal breakthroughs in fictional characterization, and character-space, are intertwined with the aesthetics of social realism. But before turning to the realist novel proper, or to the main authors of this study, I want to look at the preface to Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove*, written at the ebb of realistic poetics.

Here we find the novel quite literally reflecting on the processes of characterization that this study will scrutinize. If the preface anticipates a network of issues this study will examine, it also reveals how heavily these problems weigh on the consciousness of the novel, at the end of the realist tradition.

“They Too Should Have a Case”

James constructs a dialectical relationship between “center” and “circumference” where the inner consciousness of the putative protagonist, perhaps as in the *Iliad*, constitutes only “half” of the narrative, as the story of Milly Theale inevitably gets intertwined with, and spills out toward, other human figures. It is through this intertwining that James justifies the provocative way that his novel *begins* with subordinate characters and tardily introduces the protagonist in the second section:

If one had seen that her stricken state was but half her case, the correlative half being the state of others as affected by her (they too should have a “case,” bless them, quite as much as she!) then I was free to choose, as it were, the half with which to begin. . . . [T]hough my regenerate young New Yorker, and what might depend on her, should form my centre, my circumference was every whit as treatable. (40)

The crucial parenthetical interjection lends a moral imperative to this narrative strategy: it shows how the novel’s sense of the potential to shift narrative attention is intertwined with a specific notion of human right. In one sense, James shifts attention toward minor characters only in order to fully represent the space of the protagonist, as other people are incorporated into Milly Theale’s narrative as exterior, social agents. James makes it clear that the narrative is *compelled* to pay attention to other characters because they are implicated in Milly Theale’s own story.

[O]ur young friend’s existence would create rather, all round her, very much that whirlpool movement of the waters produced by the sinking of a big vessel or the failure of a great business; when we figure to ourselves the strong narrowing eddies, the immense force of suction, the general engulfment that, for any neighbouring object, makes immersion inevitable. I need scarce say, however, that in spite of these communities of doom I saw the main dramatic complication much more prepared *for* my vessel of sensibility than by her—the work of other hands (though with her own imbrued too, after all, in the measure of their never not being, in some direction, generous and extravagant, and thereby provoking). (39–40)

At first other characters are drawn into (or “engulfed” within) the novel in order to elucidate the “whirlpool movement” of the protagonist’s decline and fall, much as Achilles’ wrath leads immediately to its social consequences. But, crucially, James corrects himself, writing, “I saw the main dramatic com-

plication much more prepared *for* my vessel of sensibility than by her—the work of other hands.” This image of work is important, because it is precisely in their functional capacity that other characters enter into the narrative. But behind every hand is a heart and a head. Each of these narrative workers also has a “case,” an orientating consciousness that, like the protagonist’s own consciousness, could potentially organize an entire fictional universe. Thus once other characters have been incompletely brought into the story, through their functional importance, they inevitably threaten to destabilize the narrative, through the force of their unique consciousness. Such tension leads to what the preface trenchantly calls “the author’s scarce more than half-dissimulated despair at the inveterate displacement of his general centre” (46–47).

The surrounding figures become competing centers-of-consciousness, which organize the narrative into a series of “blocks”—“a new block . . . by which I mean of course a new mass of interest governed from a new centre” (49). Not just occupying a certain quantitative proportion of the narrative, these centers, James insists, have a “mass” or qualitative weight. They are, he continues,

sufficiently solid *blocks* of wrought material, squared to the sharp edge, as to have weight and mass and carrying power; to make for construction that is, to conduce to effect and to provide for beauty. Such a block, obviously, is the whole preliminary presentation of Kate Croy, which, from the first, I recall, absolutely declined to enact itself save in terms of amplitude. Terms of amplitude, terms of atmosphere, those terms, and those terms only, in which images assert their fullness and roundness, their power to revolve, so that they have sides and backs, parts in the shade as well as parts in the sun—these were plainly to be my conditions, right and left. (42)

This passage links together the mass of a character with “fullness and roundness,” anticipating—and perhaps inspiring—E. M. Forster’s 1927 theory of the flat and the round. The pressure that secondary characters exert on the narrative frame is suggestively encapsulated in James’s description of how the “preliminary” depiction of Kate Croy “declined to enact itself save in terms of amplitude.” It is, in fact, the pull of Kate Croy’s interiority, of her own point of view, that dilates the narrative; just as, describing the portion of the narrative devoted to Mrs. Lowder, a much more minor character, James notes how the reader is “saturated with her presence, her ‘personality,’ and felt all her weight in the scale” (44).

But what should we make of the phrase “squared to the sharp edge”? To square off “fullness and roundness” is to distort and limit it, to, literally, make a potentially round character flat. And, after invoking the idealistic hope that each character’s inner consciousness can achieve a weight and a mass through the fictional construction, James focuses on the inevitable, and distressing, gaps between his fiction’s sharp edges and the characters’ rounded depths. The preface thus continues, much more pessimistically: “[T]hese were plainly to be my conditions, left and right, and I was so far from overrating the amount

of expression the whole thing, as I saw it and felt it, would require, that to retrace the way at present is, alas, more than anything else, but to mark the gaps and the lapses, to miss, one by one, the intentions that, with the best will in the world, were not to fructify" (42). Here, James transforms a mimetic difficulty—the inability to fully represent human interiority—into an aesthetic difficulty—the failure of stylistic intent. These two registers—representation and style (or form)—are in fact confused and intertwined in the passage. Do the "intentions" that "fail to fructify" refer to the missing intentionalities of the fictional characters or to the artistic intention of the writer himself? The passage continues:

I have just said that the process of the general attempt is described from the moment the "blocks" are numbered, and that would be a true enough picture of my plan. Yet one's plan, alas, is one thing and one's result another; so that I am perhaps nearer the point in saying that this last strikes me at present as most characterised by the happy features that *were*, under my first and most blest illusion, to have contributed to it. I meet them all, as I renew acquaintance, I mourn for them all as I remount the stream, the absent values, the palpable voids, the missing links, the mocking shadows, that reflect, taken together, the early bloom of one's good faith. (42)

Again, James writes on two different registers. The narrative "stream" that he invokes is a description of his premodernist impressionism, but "the absent values, the palpable voids, the missing links, the mocking shadows" is also a wonderful figuration of minoriness, of the textual disruption caused by squaring a circle or reducing a head and a heart to a hand—of trying to fit the depths of human consciousness to the "sharp edges" entailed by a subordinated narrative position.¹⁴ James continues his reflection on artistic failure, on the difference between describing and showing, by imagining Kate Croy's father as a frustrated minor character leaving the room:

The image of her so compromised and compromising father was all effectually to have pervaded her life, was in a certain particular way to have tampered with her spring; by which I mean that the shame and the irritation and the depression, the general poisonous influence of him, were to have been *shown*, with a truth beyond the compass even of one's most emphasized 'word of honour' for it, to do these things. But where do we find him, at this time of day, save in a beggarly scene or two which scarce arrives at the dignity of functional reference? He but 'looks in,' poor beautiful dazzling, damning apparition that he was to have been; he sees his place so taken, his company so little missed, that, cocking again that fine form of hat which has yielded him for so long his one effective cover, he turns away with a whistle of indifference that nobly misrepresents the deepest disappointment of his life. One's poor word of honour has *had* to pass muster for the show. Every one, in short, was to have enjoyed so much better a chance that, like stars of the theatre condescending to oblige, they have had to take small parts, to content themselves with minor identities, in order to come on at all. (43)

This passage evokes the pathos and the *disappointment* of minoriness, making the preface's strongest statement of the consequences that emerge from "squaring the sharp edges." It reads as a summary of how character-space is rendered within a fraught distributional field: characters get only partially inflected into the narrative universe, reduced to a "functional reference," and the "minor identities" that ensue produce "apparitions" which shadowily reflect the fullness that has been excluded. The minor character's impoverished position—in a "*beggarly* scene or two"—collapses into his own identity: "*poor* beautiful dazzling."

Two Kinds of Minoriness

James's preface calls attention to the gap between a minor character's implied being and the manifestation of this being in the fictional universe. The inwardness of a person—"her presence, her 'personality'"—gets expressed only through an exterior sign, in this case, "cocking again that fine form of hat." Narrative flatness, in fact, produces a disjunction between "personality" and "presence," dissociating the full weight of interior character from its delimited, distorted exterior manifestation. Forced to circumscribe the interior lives of many characters in the elaboration of a singular, central consciousness, the novel has to radically delimit and distort the exterior manifestation of "roundness and fullness."

The descriptive conventions that arise around minoriness depict the symptoms of such disjunction, which takes two dominant forms: the *engulfing* of an interior personality by the delimited signs that express it and the *explosion* of the suffocated interior being into an unrepresentable, fragmentary, symptomatic form. We can consider these two typical descriptions from Dickens:

He was not old, but his hair was white; his body was bent, or bowed as if by the weight of some great trouble: and there were deep lines in his worn and melancholy face. The fire of his eyes, the expression of his features, the very voice in which he spoke, were all subdued and quenched, as if the spirit within him lay in ashes. (*Dombey and Son*, 135–36)

[H]is face was curiously twisted as by a spasm, but whether of paralysis, or grief, or inward laughter, nobody but himself could possibly explain. The expression of a man's face is commonly a help to his thoughts, or glossary on his speech; but the countenance of Newman Noggs . . . was a problem which no stretch of ingenuity could solve. (*Nicholas Nickleby*, 77)

In both these brief examples, the full actualization of human consciousness in a social, exterior form is blocked. One character's "spirit" is suffocated by his leaden exteriority, and one character's convulsive exterior is

disjoined from any connection to a furious interior that cannot find adequate form.¹⁵ (We can also note how these two passages begin to suggest a broader spectrum of contrasts, so that, for example, two different *modes of speech* reflect these two modes of being: the old man's "voice" gets "subdued and quenched," while Newman's "speech" no longer serves as a "glossary" for his thoughts.)

These two existential states lie behind the two pervasive extremes of minoriness within the nineteenth-century novel: the *worker* and the *eccentric*, the flat character who is reduced to a single functional use within the narrative, and the fragmentary character who plays a disruptive, oppositional role within the plot. These two kinds of minoriness—with all the narrative functions and descriptive conventions they motivate (to portray the characters' bodies, gestures, and speech)—are flip sides of one coin.¹⁶ In one case, the character is smoothly absorbed as a gear within the narrative machine, at the cost of his or her own free interiority; in the other case, the minor character grates against his or her position and is usually, as a consequence, wounded, exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed (within the *discourse*, if not the *story*).¹⁷ In both cases, the free relationship between surface and depth is negated; the actualization of a human being is denied.

The dialectical link between these two states is nicely illustrated in *Jane Eyre*, where one of the most famous *fragmentary* minor characters gets oddly shadowed by a more obscure *flat* one. Bertha Mason is, of course, an exemplary case of the minor character as "eccentric" or "opposer," an influential paradigm of one kind of minoriness.¹⁸ In Bertha, story and discourse interlock, as her narrative subordination is clearly linked to social subordination. Shut up in the story, in her literal confinement as "the madwoman in the attic," Bertha Mason is also shut up within the narrative discourse, revealed only in sporadic passages that present her in a fragmentary form. The denial of her own perspective, of her claims on Rochester, thus gets linked to her discursive configuration; the subordinated interiority explodes out in an alienated form, as the "continued *outbreaks* of her violent and unreasonable temper" (291, emphasis added).

At first, however, Jane mistakes this minor character's identity, and superimposes the disruptive presence of Bertha onto Grace Poole, a quite different minor character who seems flattened by the drudgery of her service:

The door nearest me opened, and a servant came out—a woman of between thirty and forty; a set, square-made figure, red-haired, and with a *hard, plain face*: any apparition less romantic or less ghostly could scarcely be conceived. . . . Her appearance always acted as a damper to the curiosities raised by her oral oddities: hard-featured and staid, *she had no point to which interest could attach*. I made some attempts to draw her into conversation, but *she seemed a person of few words*: a monosyllabic reply usually cut short every effort of that sort. (99, 101, emphases added)

Grace Poole does not have too *much* emotion, like Bertha, but too little of it: her rigid exteriority drowns out an inner personality, so that her countenance and conversation (the two most direct manifestations of interior sentiment) yield nothing. Once again, these two kinds of minorness catalyze two different modes of inadequate speech, as Jane, still confusing Bertha with Grace, remarks: “There were days when she was quite silent, but there were others when I could not account for the sounds she made” (101). Here Jane conflates Grace’s inexpressive “silence” and Bertha’s inarticulate “sounds,” each of which falls on one side of the *speech* that can translate interiority into social communication. The odd conflation makes dialectical sense as, between them, Grace and Bertha illustrate the double consequences of minorness. Only in their combination can we shift from the particular oddity of each minor character to the broad structure of domination and subordination, which conjoins the outbreaks of eccentricity and the monotony of functionality.¹⁹

Function and Alienation: The Labor Theory of Character

My study deploys this typology of minorness in place of the traditional classification in terms of function. The merit of these categories—the engulfed and the exploding—is that they take account of the essential dynamics of narrative subordination itself. A typology of characters based merely on the different ways that characters function or are described within a literary text can overlook the crucial process of functionalization within the narrative. As we can see in James’s preface, novelists are often aware of, and can deliberately heighten, tensions between their interest in a character as a fictive individual and this character’s reduction to, or compression within, a functional narrative role. The attempt to circumscribe a character within his or her delimited functionality is always potentially problematic—human beings take up more weight than they fill in this limited role, and it is difficult to separate their exterior function from their interior singularity. How can a human being enter into a narrative world and *not* disrupt the distribution of attention? Such a question might be the axiom of this entire study.

Function itself takes on new social meaning in nineteenth-century Europe, as industrialization and economic stratification harden a division of labor that constricts full human beings to increasingly specialized roles. Such specialization underlies both the engulfing and the exploding of minor characters, the worker and the eccentric, as both conditions result from the disjunction of (exterior) surface and (interior) depth. We have seen how James calls the delimited participation of subordinate characters in the protagonist’s story the “work of other hands.” In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx draws a relationship between “utility” and individuality that casts light on the poetics of fictional characterization that emerges in the realist era. Marx attacks utilitarian-

ism as an ideology that converts people, and the lived experience of social interaction, into functions, or the abstract expression of utility:

The apparent stupidity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the one relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction arises from the fact that, in modern bourgeois society, all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation. . . . In Holbach, all the activity of individuals in their mutual intercourse, e.g. speech, love, etc. is depicted as a relation of utility and utilization. Hence the actual relations that are presupposed here are speech, love, the definite manifestations of definite qualities of individuals. Now these relations are supposed not to have the meaning peculiar to them but to be the expression and manifestation of some third relation introduced in their place, the relation of utility or utilization. . . . [O]ne sees at a glance that the category of “utilization” is first of all abstracted from the actual relations of intercourse which I have with other people (but by no means from reflection and mere will) and then these relations are made out to be the reality of the category that has been extracted from them themselves, in a wholly metaphysical method of procedure. (185)

In a similar way, the functionalization of minor characters effaces “the definite manifestations of definite qualities of individuals” (or what Watt labels “particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places”) and abstracts these qualities so that they lose “*the meaning peculiar to them.*” The quality that has been extracted from lived experience is then turned into a category within which concrete, material relations are subsumed: “these relations are made out to be the reality of the category that has been extracted from them themselves.”

The nineteenth-century novel’s configuration of *narrative* work—within the context of omniscient, asymmetric character-systems—creates a formal structure that can imaginatively comprehend the dynamics of alienated labor, and the class structure that underlies this labor. In terms of their essential formal position (the subordinate beings who are delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else), *minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*; and the realist novel—with its intense class-consciousness and attention toward social inequality—makes much use of such formal processes. A condensed, stylized enactment of this relationship between minorness and alienation—not in terms of an entire narrative, but rather in a single sentence—appears early in Proust’s *Du côté de chez Swann*. The narrator in Combray is describing his grandmother’s habit of walking in the garden:

Elle disait: “Enfin, on respire!” et parcourait les allées détremées—trop symétriquement alignées à son gré par le nouveau jardinier dépourvu du sentiment de la nature et auquel mon père avait demandé depuis le matin si le temps s’arrangerait—de son petit pas enthousiaste et saccadé, réglé sur les mouvements divers qu’excitaient dans son âme l’ivresse de l’orage, la puissance de l’hygiène, la stupidité de mon éducation

et la symétrie des jardins, plutôt que sur le désir inconnu d'elle d'éviter à sa jupe prune les taches de boue sous lesquelles elle disparaissait jusqu'à une hauteur qui était toujours pour sa femme de chambre un désespoir et un problème. (104)

[She would say, "At last one can breathe!" and would run up and down the soaking paths—too straight and symmetrical for her liking, owing to the want of any feeling for nature in the new gardener, whom my father had been asking all morning if the weather was going to improve—with her keen jerky little steps regulated by the various effects wrought upon her soul by the intoxication of the storm, the force of hygiene, the stupidity of my education and the symmetry of gardens, rather than by any anxiety (for that was quite unknown to her) to save her plum-coloured skirt from the spots of mud under which it would gradually disappear to a depth which always provided her maid with a problem and filled her with despair.]²⁰

In many ways, this distended sentence is emblematic of Proust's radically modern novelistic style. The density of the language interrupts our direct comprehension of what it describes, so that the sentence references the (fictional) writing subject more than the objects that he writes about. We should not, however, read the Proustian bulge simply as a reversal of realistic poetics: away from the observed object toward the observing subject, away from exterior description toward interior apprehension. The sentence's distention, I would argue, registers its problematic incorporation of two minor characters: the gardener, who extends the main ellipses in the sentence, and the maid, who adds on the final (and thus most disruptive) subordinate clause. The gardener and the maid are here the mechanisms for two of Proust's most essential stylistic devices: interruption and extension. Rereading the passage without these two clauses, we can see that the maid and the gardener lie *behind* this sentence's difficulty. The distorted syntax is caused, in both cases, by an inability to accommodate these peripheral characters within the normal flow of a sentence. Once again, if only through the contortion of its form, the passage conveys the elided consciousness, the compelling "case" of these characters. More specifically, the distended sentence leads us obliquely but inexorably to the basic dehumanizing structure of labor exchange. The servant disappears into his or her labor, is manifested only through a subordinate clause—an afterthought that considers the cause or result of a more central action. The grandmother's walk through the garden catalyzes these kinds of afterthoughts—who made the garden path prior to the walk? who cleans up the muddied dress after the walk?—until these afterthoughts, which are made manifest in the crevices and corners of the sentence, build up into the Proustian bulge.

For Marx, utilitarianism's theft of experience—which is a purely conceptual theft—results from the actual expropriation of the labor-power of the many by the few.²¹ If exploitation directly extracts the worker's lived experience in an alien form, utilization abstractly engulfs the specificity of human experience into the generalized categories that it derives out of this experience. (As utiliza-

tion covers over the exploitation that inheres in the social structure, so character-function effaces the narrative subordination that produces minor characters.) Marx then notes, however, that from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, utilization is not the destruction of lived experience but, on the contrary, the condition for the development of the free human being, for the *bildungs* project itself: “Holbach’s theory is the historically justified philosophical illusion about the bourgeoisie just then developing in France, whose thirst for exploitation could still be described as a thirst for the full development of individuals in conditions of intercourse freed from the old feudal fetters. Liberation from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, i.e. competition, was, of course, for the 18th century the only possible way of offering the individuals a new career for free development” (186). Utility both expresses the structural contingency of the bourgeoisie—in relationship to the exploitation of other human individuals—and facilitates the “full development of individuals.” Similarly, in the bildungsroman—the genre most essential to the development of the novelistic protagonist—the hero’s progress is facilitated through a series of interactions with delimited minor characters. Each encounter has a particular psychological function within the interior development of the young protagonist, as minor characters stand for particular states of mind, or psychological modes, that the protagonist interacts with and transcends. In a novel like *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* the free, full development of the central protagonist is contingent on the utilization, and delimitation, of minor characters (most notably Werner, Mignon, and Philine). Georg Lukács thus notes how Wilhelm’s development into a coherently integrated human being takes place through a dialectical interaction with other characters’ “specialized” extremes:

In this work Goethe depicts a whole tangle of individual lives which interweave with one another. He depicts those who, guilty or not, are tragically ruined; he portrays persons whose life dissolves into nothingness; he draws characters in whom the specialization, brought about by the capitalist division of labour, ossifies one feature of their personality to the point of caricature, leaving the rest of their humanity to atrophy completely. . . . The persons in this novel are grouped almost exclusively around the struggle for the ideal of humanism, around the problem of two false extremes: enrapturement and practicality. (*Goethe and His Age*, 55)

The bildungsroman organizes the novel’s two modes of characterization, the interior protagonist and the distorted minor character (whether eccentric and “enraptured” or functional and overly “practical”), into a coherent and compelling whole. Franco Moretti has argued that the figure of the developing youth that becomes the new locus of heroism in the nineteenth-century bildungsroman is a way to imaginatively comprehend and mediate the dynamics and tensions of social mobility.²² The asymmetric character-system allows the novel to juxtapose this development with the conjoined processes of social stratification. Structures of characterization that lock together protagonist and

minor character allow the realist novel to comprehend a relationship between the full, interior individual (the “ideal of humanism”) and social disjunction. Thus E. M. Forster, disputing the claim that an overly flat character “falsifies life,” insists on a larger *structure* of characterization that is mimetically significant: “[A] novel that is at all complex often *requires* flat people as well as round, and the outcome of their *collisions* parallels life more accurately than Mr. Douglas implies” (108, emphases added). Or as Dickens thematically brings together Forster’s narrative model and Marx’s social one: “It was a rude shock to his sense of property in his child, that these people—the mere dust of the earth, as he thought of them—should be *necessary* to him” (*Dombey and Son*, 70, emphasis added).

Realism, Democracy, and Inequality

If we had a keen vision for all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we would die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

This study, like any analysis of genre, is located at an imprecise juncture between form and history: constructing a conceptual model for characterization within narrative poetics and analyzing a specific sequence of literary-historical circumstances. It would be a mistake to delimit the idea of “character-space” and “character-system” to the nineteenth-century European novel, even though the significance of narrative minoriness, and the social and literary meaning of functionality, develop in specific ways in this period and place. I would instead suggest that the dynamics of distribution—and the tension between structure and reference that emerges in, and formulates, distribution—is inherent to narrativity as formal process. The specific focus on nineteenth-century fiction, however, is not a retreat from the consideration of this formal practice in its most essential dimensions, since the realist novel gives us a precise image or rendering of how this mode of narrative signification can function and become legible. The inclusive aesthetics of the nineteenth-century realist tradition—with its dual impulses to bring in a multitude of characters and to bring out the interiority of a singular protagonist—illuminates particularly well the tension between the structural and referential axes of characterization. The making of minor characters opens onto rich aspects of nineteenth-century fictions and social forms, and a concerted analysis of nineteenth-century fiction can highlight and elucidate a narrative process that is quite relevant to a broad spectrum of literature as well as to pictorial and cinematic art.²³

I want to explore, more specifically, the relationship between what I will call an asymmetric structure of characterization—in which many are repre-

sented but attention flows toward a delimited center—and the nineteenth-century comprehension of social stratification. The dynamic interaction between flatness and roundness identified by Forster facilitates social realism's dual focus on psychological depth and social expansiveness. It also registers the competing pull of inequality and democracy within the nineteenth-century bourgeois imagination. In my reading of the realist aesthetic, a dialectical literary form is generated out of the relationship between inequality and democracy. The realist novel is infused with the sense that any character is a potential hero, but simultaneously enchanted with the freestanding individual, defined through his or her interior consciousness. In the paradigmatic character-structure of the realist novel, any character *can* be a protagonist, but only one character is: just as increasing political equality, and a maturing logic of human rights, develop amid acute economic and social stratification.²⁴ On the one hand, the asymmetric structure of realist characterization—which rounds out one or several characters while flattening, and distorting, a manifold assortment of characters—reflects actual structures of inequitable distribution. On the other hand, the *claims* of minor characters on the reader's attention—and the resultant tension between characters and their functions—are generated by the democratic impulse that forms a horizon of nineteenth-century politics. As C. B. Macpherson, writing about England, argues, "The extent and genuineness of the franchise became the central question because, by the early nineteenth-century in England, theorists were able to take for granted the rest of the framework of representative government: the constitutional provisions whereby legislatures and executives were periodically chosen, and therefore periodically replaceable, by the voters at general elections, and whereby the civil service (and the military) were subordinate to a government thus responsible to the electorate" (34).

Middlemarch—famously lodged between the era of the First Reform Bill (when it is set) and the Second Reform Bill (when it is written), two flashpoints in the struggle over the franchise's "extent and genuineness"—provides a magisterial example of the connection between the question of democracy and the distributed field of characterization. *Middlemarch*'s remarkable character-system achieves a precarious balance between different patterns of distribution. It can be read in terms of a singular protagonist (Dorothea), a pair of co-protagonists (including Lydgate), a series of principal characters (including Mary and Fred, Will, Rosamond, Casaubon, and Bulstrode) or a manifold group of characters, extending from principals to nearly anonymous figures, who all compete for attention within the narrative web. Eliot's desire to preserve a singular protagonist *and* to extend narrative attention to a broad mass of characters evocatively parallels John Stuart Mill's strange compromise position on universal suffrage, which idealistically insists on democratic principles (both morally and politically) *and* tries to preserve basic structures of class privilege. Mill imagines a franchise that is both stratified and universal: all

citizens would receive voting power but to unequal degrees, just as *Middlemarch* includes many characters, while configuring them in various ways:

First, then, in every system of representation which can be conceived as perfect, every adult human being, it appears to me, would have the means of exercising, through the electoral suffrage, a portion of influence on the management of public affairs. . . . But ought every one to have an *equal* voice? This is a totally different proposition; and in my judgment as palpably false, as the other is true and important. . . . If every ordinary unskilled labourer had one vote, a skilled labourer, whose occupation requires an exercised mind and a knowledge of some of the laws of external nature, ought to have two. A foreman, or superintendent of labour, whose occupation requires something more of general culture, and some moral as well as intellectual qualities, should perhaps have three. A farmer, manufacturer or trader, who requires a still larger range of ideas and knowledge, and the power of guiding and attending to a great number of various operations at once, should have three or four. A member of any profession requiring a long, accurate, and systematic mental cultivation—a lawyer, a physician, or surgeon, a clergyman . . . ought to have five or six. (322 and 324)

Middlemarch's intricate balances between protagonist and minor characters call into question, without repudiating, an asymmetric norm that had become an essential aspect of nineteenth-century omniscient narrative. This ambivalence is also conveyed in the Eliot epigraph to this section, which simultaneously registers the imperative to look at the masses of “ordinary life” and anxiously worries that the sight might be too much. In its hostility and its sympathy toward the ordinary life that, by being silenced, can only take the form of a roar, Eliot’s passage captures the peculiar extremes of the realist imagination, caught between idealism and anxiety, between including and distorting minor characters, in the double pull of democracy and inequality.

Austen, Dickens, Balzac: Character-Space in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

“Only connect.” It is of course the case that the nineteenth-century novel contains a greater quantity of characters than most previous literature—a huge variety of individuals who get crowded together into a single story. The omniscient totality of the nineteenth-century novel compels us to “connect” these individuals—to comprehend forms of social relation which can encompass the diverse populations that people these novels. By character-system, however, I don’t mean the interlocking of a number of distinct fictional individuals within a narrative totality but rather the combination of different character-spaces or of various modes *through which* specific human figures are inflected into the narrative. The nineteenth-century novel also compels us to “connect” these

often widely disparate character-spaces or modes *of* characterizing. We might think here of such complicated, rich, and varied character-systems as those we find in *Madame Bovary* or *Moby Dick*: these novels contain both a multitude of distinct individuals who are co-implicated within the story and a multitude of individuals who are *distinctively configured and positioned* within the novel as a whole. The integration of these varied modes of characterization into unified structures is a massive achievement of the nineteenth-century literary imagination. In novels like *Madame Bovary* or *Moby Dick*—or *Crime and Punishment*, or *Anna Karenina*—we need both to coordinate the large list of characters and to consider how each individual character-space is combined and differentially refracted through the narrative structure. The realist character-system is always oriented in two directions: toward each uniquely delineated character-space (and the implied human figure that it amplifies or obscures) *and* toward the unified structure, the symbolic or thematic edifice, the interconnected plot that is being constructed through—and often helping to delimit or distort—these character-spaces.

It is for this reason that I've concentrated on several novelists, and several novels, rather than a wider range of materials: precisely to show that attention to minor characters doesn't serve merely to disperse analysis centrifugally. In fact, almost every nineteenth-century novel is informed by the problematics of character-space: both in terms of the particular elaboration of a "hero" or central protagonist and in the inflection of inevitable (and often numerous) secondary figures. Furthermore, many novels offer interesting variations on these problems—both in the ironization of centrality (through an unconventional choice of protagonist or the dispersion of the major role into two, three, or four dominant figures) and in the innovative configuration, compression, or utilization of minor characters (through particularly compelling subordinate figures or in the organization of the overall character field). The problematics of distribution are at work in the genre as a whole, intersecting in countless ways with stylistic, structural, thematic, ideological, and sociohistorical dimensions of various nineteenth-century fictions. I have focused on some of those novels that best elucidate the very grounds of this problem: novels that confront key questions in characterization, offer new formulations of character, and elaborate the problematic of distribution *within* the fictional world itself.

My first chapter, an inductive analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*, attempts to formulate (rather than apply) the theory I have been discussing. The chapter temporarily puts aside the conceptual terms sketched in this introduction—the dual lenses of character-space and character-system—in order to gradually bring out these terms from within the aesthetic workings of the novel.²⁵ Crucially, I will offer a reading of the novel as a whole—in terms of both its entire diachronic progression and its full range of characterization. At the origin of both these planes—at the *beginning* of the story and at the *center* of its web of characters—are the five Bennet sisters, who share a single narrative situation:

an entailed estate that necessitates their entering into the competition among many women for a limited amount of wealth. This competition grounds the persistent nuance, and discrimination, of Austen's ironic voice. Ironic and omniscient, the narrator configures the five sisters' central situation into an asymmetrical structure, developing Elizabeth Bennet into a strong, central protagonist and making Lydia, Catherine, Mary, and Jane into different kinds of minor characters. Elizabeth's centrality emerges only in dynamic interaction with the development of these (and other) minor characters, so that the narrative price of her achieved interiority is the distortion of many other human figures.

My reading of *Pride and Prejudice* stands, in turn, at the origin of this study's two planes: at the center of my formal model and at the beginning of my historic analysis. On the one hand, my reading reveals the distributional matrix as it generates the two essential modes of realist characterization: a strong, rounded, fully realized central protagonist and a manifold group of delimited, "specialized" minor characters. At the same time, the tightly organized narrative structure of Austen's fiction suggests a new kind of novelistic coherence in which each part of the narrative—whether character, episode, or word—is integral to, and has a specific and contextualized position within, the fiction as a whole. The kind of novelistic coherence that Austen achieves has often been looked at apart from the social dynamics of her realist fiction. In fact, the closed formal structure of Austen's narrative fiction (relying, among other elements, on the impersonality of the omniscient narrator) suggests a radical interconnection between the two modes of character that the novels formulate, opening new horizons for social realism. The moral force of *Pride and Prejudice* has been traditionally located within Elizabeth Bennet's "full development." I will argue that it rests equally in the novel's refusal to stay *within* Elizabeth's development, in its insistence on showing how the protagonist's development rests on top of a system of utilization which fragments the fictional universe that surrounds her. In this sense the moral vision comes in the most negative form.

The critique implicit in the structure of characterization that Austen originates becomes more realized as the omniscient novel develops, even as the processes of competition and stratification that quietly underlie the enclosed social world (and stratified narrative system) of *Pride and Prejudice* get more directly represented. Later novelists write within the framework of asymmetry that Austen so successfully constructs while often straining, in various ways, to make more of minor characters. This effort can take many forms. I have already mentioned George Eliot's combination of a morally voluble omniscient voice and intricate narrative webs that link together many minor characters. A novel like Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (or, in a different sense, Zola's *Germinal*) tries to extend the parameters of character *topically*, through a focus on working-class individuals (who would traditionally appear only *as* minor characters), while in many ways preserving an asymmetric *form*.

Wilkie Collins's development of a perspectival narrative system—where our most basic comprehension of the story requires active concatenation of various, stratified narrative voices—is another, entirely different reworking of the tensions of asymmetry. In fact, the arrangement of protagonist and minor characters—within the story and the discourse—is a problem that almost any novel in this period must work through, becoming an essential field of narrative signification.

My study concentrates on Dickens and Balzac, the two novelists who make the most significant, and most imaginatively realized, contributions to the enlargement of the realist novel's franchise. Both novelists make more of minor characters, in radically different ways. Dickens's panoply of eccentrics and grotesques brings minor characters to the center of his novels by *increasing* their distortion. Balzac, in an attempt to give every character potential roundness, bursts apart the seams of *La Comédie humaine*, creating one vast and interconnected narrative universe. Chapter 2 breaks from analysis of a single narrative structure to examine Dickens's descriptive strategies as they manifest themselves in characters across different novels, from *The Pickwick Papers* to *Our Mutual Friend*. This follows from the logic of Dickens's own narrative organization, as his texts free minor characters from a structural position and concentrate their effect in the descriptive configuration itself. I consider *why* Dickens's characterization often de-emphasizes structure while overemphasizing local affect. The result is a more immediate historicity than Austen's: immediate in the sense that Dickens, time and again, makes direct and vivid links between a minor character's distortion and his or her subordination; but also in the sense that he is disinclined to pull back *from* these effects to dynamically represent the structures that produce such subordination. In chapter 3, I shift this analysis of Dickens's descriptive poetics to an interpretation of a single narrative, offering a close reading of *Great Expectations*, which, as in chapter 1, attempts to understand the character-system as a totality. While *Pride and Prejudice* features a strong protagonist, the intensity and vigor of whose personality seems to almost compel minorness all around her, *Great Expectations* features a weak protagonist, overwhelmed on all sides by various kinds of minor characters. With its child-protagonist who is also an adult narrator, *Great Expectations* gives concrete form to the narrative process that underlies all of Dickens's work: the central, but passive, protagonist who encounters the powerful, but distorted, minor character. Dickens subtly and intricately links this structure of characterization to the modern economic and social relations that extinguish Pip's expectations.

The very structure of Balzac's *La Comédie humaine* dramatically registers the problem of minor characters, and characterization, that this study concentrates on. The elephantine scope of *La Comédie* can be diagnosed, in one sense, as the price a novel must pay to avoid making certain characters minor. Rejecting a single closed narrative, Balzac develops a system of recurring charac-

ters and interconnected novels: we are always aware that a secondary character in one novel might become the protagonist in another. Tracing the strategy of narrative interconnection to the novel in which it originates, I analyze how *Le Père Goriot* also revolves around the complexities of *social* interconnection in a capitalist system, figured through the overlaid stories of the *pensionnaires* at the Maison Vauquer and directly embodied in Rastignac's youthful insecurity and ambition.

Le Père Goriot features neither a weak nor a strong protagonist but two competing co-protagonists. The three main novels in this study—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, *Le Père Goriot*—thus illustrate three different and essential kinds of asymmetric narrative. These variations are not exhaustive, in the sense that they establish the bounds of the realist character-system, but, on the contrary, are meant to suggest how the process of permutation itself is a central aspect of character-system. If any character-system contains a constellation of intersecting and simultaneously unfolding character-spaces (minorness, after all, is partially developed *as* the attention rests on other figures), the character-system itself unfolds against the horizon of other possible configurations—not just configurations hypothetically or implicitly suggested within the narrative but achieved configurations forming the intertextual and generic conventions that any particular structural presentation of character is set against.²⁶ This kind of literary history is particularly relevant to *Le Père Goriot*, as the eponymous character's claim for centrality is intertwined with what is probably Balzac's most famous literary allusion: Goriot as an ironic version of King Lear. Examining the competing character-spaces of Rastignac and Goriot allows for, and indeed demands, a new interpretation of this ironic intertextuality, as the character-system of *King Lear*, with its radically centered protagonist, is the ground from which the permutation of *Le Père Goriot* departs.

The competition between Rastignac and Goriot—not as individuals within the story but in their discursive status *as* protagonists—is at the heart of *Le Père Goriot*'s character-system, and, in this sense, at the center of the interconnected narratives of *La Comédie humaine* (which are conceived *as* a totality in the writing of *Le Père Goriot*). I analyze the narrative rift that this competition between character-spaces creates in relation both to Balzac's powerful representation of social competition and to the poetics of characterization (the recurring personage, the social "type") that underlies his fictional project. This competition is essential to *Le Père Goriot* but perhaps more explicitly apparent in *Les Employés*, a relatively unremarked "scene from Parisian life" that is noteworthy for the number of dull, delimited characters it incorporates into the story. The problem of distributing attention to different characters—which literally threatens to turn this minor novel into disconnected theatrical scenes and social tableaux—is dramatized in the ruthless competition between the

able protagonist, Rabourdin, and an incompetent coworker for a government promotion. And this personal competition—between two characters for one position—is intertwined with Rabourdin’s attempt to transform the bureaucratic *structure*, as it generates a dispersed, and destructive, field of competition. A chapter heading of *Les Employés* thus offers the title for this chapter, but its question—“A qui la place?” (i.e., who gets the position?)—can apply back to *Le Père Goriot*, now not in terms of interacting characters (within the competitive world of Paris) but in terms of intersecting character-spaces (within the narrative discourse). After tracing *Le Père Goriot*’s character-system (which will shape the contours of the entire *Comédie*), I bring the two novels together around this question—reading the story of *Les Employés* through the discursive competition in *Le Père Goriot*, and the structure of *Le Père Goriot* through the bureaucratic competition that forms the narrative and thematic center of *Les Employés*.

The Minor Character: Between Story and Discourse

At first glance the interpretation of minor characters might seem to be nothing else than a repudiation of the text’s own hierarchy of value, bringing to the critical foreground what has been subordinated to the narrative background. But how do we come to have this term “minor character” in the first place? The very occasion of the category suggests some dissonance between the character’s delimited role and more extended impact. If “minor characters” were *literally* minor in the normative sense of this word—“Comparatively small or unimportant; not to be reckoned among the greater or principal individuals of the kind” (*Oxford English Dictionary*)—the term itself would never have been formulated or deployed so often in literary criticism and evaluation.

Minor characters exist *as* a category, then, only because of their strange centrality to so many texts, perhaps to narrative signification itself. But this is not to say that once we acknowledge the significance of the minor character, he suddenly becomes major, breaking out of his subordinate position in the narrative discourse. This would be to elide the very source through which the minor character signifies—and is made significant to the reader who strangely remembers. In one sense, certainly, the minor character stands out because the writer has done a lot with a little: illuminated that one scene, those few lines, that one pivotal moment in which the character appears. Or, in E. M. Forster’s terms, lit upon that one memorable gesture.²⁷ (We can think here, for example, of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*: the brevity of his life and his compressed space within the play seem to flow into the intensity and pressure of his language, producing that energy which catapults him right out of the plot.) But the minor character’s interesting distinction cannot be based simply on the

brief moment during which he stands out; in fact, it is precisely the opposite. The minor character is always drowned out within the totality of the narrative; and what we remember about the character is never detached from how the text, for the most part, makes us forget him. (Otherwise the minor character emerges only out of the *wreck* of the text as a whole, like the single gifted actor in a poor production, whose very talent calls our attention to the shoddiness of the show.)

The strange significance of minor characters, in other words, resides largely in the way that the character disappears, and in the tension or relief that results from this vanishing. These feelings are often solicited by the narrative, and it is the disappearance of the minor character (for *every* minor character does—by strict definition—disappear) that, finally, is integrated into his or her interesting speech or memorable gesture. We feel interest and outrage, painful concern or amused consent at what happens to minor characters: not simply their fate within the story (whether they marry or die, make their fortune or lose it, find a home or become exiled) but also in the narrative discourse itself (how they are finally overshadowed or absorbed into someone else's story, swallowed within or expelled from another person's plot).

This is simply, once again, to locate the minor character at the junction between implied person and narrative form, to read characterization in terms of the tension that narrative continually elicits between an individual who claims our interest and a fictional totality that forces this individual out of, or beneath, the discursive world. In this sense, the minor character, by calling attention to character-space, helps establish the relationship of "story" and "discourse"—the events in the novel and the rendition of these events in the narrative itself. The distinction between "story" and "discourse" is at the very crux of the interpretation of narrative and goes by many names: the tale and the telling; *histoire* and *discours*; *sjuzet* and *fabula*.²⁸ All these dichotomous terms refer, finally, to the essentially divided nature of the literary text, as it is torn between form and content; between the signified and the signifier; between the text's linguistic world—words, sentences, chapters—and the imagined world that we grasp at through the text. Discourse points us to the narrative's actual language and structure; story to the fictional events that we reconstruct through the narrative, to "the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events."²⁹

The character-space provides a new framework through which we can apprehend an important mode of signification that is produced—like most narrative meaning—in the intersection of story and discourse. My specific employment of these terms is illustrated in passages from *Vanity Fair* and *Mansfield Park* where we see the same process, a subordinate character becoming so minor she is expelled from the novel, on these two different registers:

But why speak about her? It is probable that we shall not hear of her again from this moment to the end of time, and that when the great filigree iron gates are once closed on her, she and her awful sister will never issue therefrom into this little world of history. (4)

It ended in Mrs. Norris's resolving to quit Mansfield, and devote herself to her unfortunate Maria, and in an establishment being formed for them in another country—remote and private, where shut up together with little society, on one side no affection, on the other, no judgment, it may be reasonably supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment. . . . She was regretted by no one at Mansfield. . . . Not even Fanny had tears for aunt Norris—not even when she was gone forever. (465)

In the first example, Jemima Pinkerton disappears from the narrative discourse, while in Austen's novel Mrs. Norris disappears from an imagined space within the story itself. And yet the two passages resonate with each other, employing the same spatial and temporal imagery. Thackeray's image of "the great filigree iron gates" that close on Jemima resembles the way Mrs. Norris and Maria end up "remote and private . . . shut up together." And Thackeray's admonishment that "she will *never* issue . . . into this little world of history" conveys the same finality as Austen's "even when she was gone *forever*." Such a conflation indicates a narrative process that flows smoothly from the imagined world into the narrative's discursive structure. The character-space always arises at the intersection of story and discourse.

We can see both kinds of expulsion densely intertwined in a third minor character, the crucial but marginal Bulkington in *Moby Dick*. If a minor character becomes significant only as he disappears, Bulkington quite literally vanishes (in the story itself), capturing attention precisely as he departs:

I observed, however, that one of them held somewhat aloof, and though he seemed desirous not to spoil the hilarity of his shipmates by his own sober face, yet upon the whole he refrained from making as much noise as the rest. This man interested me at once; and since the sea-gods had ordained that he should soon become my shipmate (*though but a sleeping-partner one, so far as this narrative is concerned*), I will here venture upon a little description of him. . . . When the revelry of his companions had mounted to its height, *this man slipped away unobserved*, and I saw no more of him till he became my comrade on the sea. In a few minutes, however, he was missed by his shipmates, and, being, it seems, for some reason, a huge favorite with them, they raised a cry of "Bulkington! where's Bulkington?" and darted out of the house in pursuit of him. (23)

So big, but so anonymous: Bulkington becomes prominent only as he enters into obscurity, after he has "slipped away unobserved." And just as Bulkington, within the story, registers on his shipmates' consciousness only as he

vanishes from them, so his subordination in the *discourse* will confer an important symbolic function on him. The narrator thus goes out of his way to note that Bulkington will be on board the ship *for the entire story* only to warn us that he will be “but a sleeping-partner . . . , so far as this narrative is concerned.”³⁰

The oversize Bulkington’s disappearance, in both story and discourse, dramatizes how narrative subordination always involves some degree of vanishing. The minor character rests in the shadow-space between narrative position and human personality: an implied human being who gets constricted into a delimited role, but who has enough resonance *with* a human being to make us aware of this constricted position *as* delimited. The strange resonance of minor characters—the way that we so often come away from a novel, a drama, or a film remembering a marginal player, a side story, a fate only faintly illuminated or etched—stems from the intricacy of this narrative process; from the character who is *not* directly or fully represented in the narrative, and who comes to command a peculiar kind of attention in the partial occlusion of his fullness.

We could contrast this with Wayne Booth’s meditation on narrative “fairness”:

Even among characters of equal moral, intellectual, or aesthetic worth, all authors inevitably take sides. A given work will be “about” a character or set of characters. It cannot possibly give equal emphasis to all, regardless of what its author believes about the desirability of fairness. *Hamlet* is not fair to Claudius. . . . But who cares? The novelist who chooses to tell this story cannot at the same time tell that story; in centering our interest, sympathy, or affection on one character, he inevitably excludes from our interest, sympathy, or affection some other character. (78–79)

Booth makes an acute observation here, only to retreat from the implication of his insight for fear of wrenching the text away from the author’s own intention. But to contemplate and seek to externalize submerged perspectives within a narrative does not always mean reading against the text’s own artistic organization. Couldn’t one argue, in fact, that precisely the possibility of *telling more than one story at the same time* rests near the center of literary narrative as such? Novelists cannot “possibly give equal emphasis to all” characters; but narratives certainly do call attention to the process of emphasizing and the problems of “stinting” (to use Chaucer’s term)—constantly suggesting how other possible stories, and other people’s full lives, are intertwined with and obscured by the main focus of attention.

Booth’s analysis, in other words, cuts short the generative tension between story and discourse: seeking to confirm the constructed achievement of the narrative design, he too quickly wards off a crucial way that narrative does signify. The distribution of attention to different characters, unfolding only through the intersection and entwinement of story and discourse, always gener-

ates a rich double vision: we have two superimposed patterns or arrangements that will rarely overlap or coincide and will frequently, and to great effect, diverge significantly. On the one hand, we have the polycentric arrangement of the story, the plot that pulls in many different individuals, each of whom has a unique (perhaps unelaborated) experience within the story and a unique (perhaps submerged) perspective on the story. On the other hand, we have the single, delimited, finite, and particular shaping of this story into a fixed discourse, the actual discourse that arranges such characters in a specific way. Here, the tendency is always away from a polycentric, or symmetrical, distribution, toward various forms of imbalance: all the characters still retain some position in the narrative discourse (else we could never place them in the story at all), but these are radically differentiated.

Neither one of these arrangements or narrative shapes has meaning exclusive of the other. To read characters in narrative, we need to read the dialectical tension between the formed distribution of attention within the discourse and the potential patterning of distribution within the story. This is far from a prescriptive aesthetics. I am not arguing that we need to assume a radical equality between all characters in a novel, and that, through this “proper” arrangement of how the story should be told, we can reinterpret narrative history, bending discourses formed in asymmetrical ways into a new, more symmetrical shape. This would mean that we begin with a “story” that is at a far remove from the text itself, and seek to impose this story back onto a narrative with an utterly different shape. Rather, I am arguing that narratives themselves allow and solicit us to construct a story—a distributed pattern of attention—that is at odds with, or divergent from, the formed pattern of attention in the discourse. This strikes near the essential openness of the literary text. The literary text solicits reinterpretation; it creates disjunctions between story and discourse that facilitate the production of meaning, the production of significance. It creates, more specifically, disjunctions between the attention the discourse grants certain characters and the attention that they would grant themselves and that the reader might grant them. This process takes a particularly acute and meaningful form in the nineteenth-century realist novel, with its complicated networks of characters, its varied techniques for registering the pull and possibility of interior consciousness, and its wide range of narrative structures that enact and represent both the premises of democratic equality and the pressures and consequences of social stratification.

This gives a more integrated perspective on the problem of narrative “fairness”: a problem that is hard to grapple with because it remains so enmeshed within the tangled thicket of aesthetics, ideology, and ethics. We don’t need to always choose between either admiring a text for the way it gives a character voice (by registering his or her perspective, point of view, and interior thoughts) or, in what clearly prompts Booth’s frustration, attacking

a text for unfairly excluding a character's voice. Frequently the character-system is more intricate than this, powerfully inscribing the very absence of voice that the distributional system produces. The minor character—that roundness squared to a sharp edge, that appearance of a disappearance—is so successful as a narrative type in precisely this way, as he enfolds the untold tale into the telling.