Imagined Human Beings

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PART I

Introduction
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It is not difficult to see why psychoanalytic theory has been widely used in the study of literature. Psychoanalysis deals with human beings in conflict with themselves and each other, and literature portrays and is written and read by such people. What is confusing is that there are so many psychoanalytic theories, each with its claims and proponents. It clearly makes sense to use psychoanalysis in literary study, but which theory should we employ?

I do not believe that literature should be placed on the Procrustean bed of any one theory. Human psychology is inordinately complex and can be approached in many ways. A number of theories have accurately described certain aspects of it, but none has the whole truth or is universally applicable. Many theorists have derived global models of human nature from the limited range of phenomena they understand well, or have tried to explain too much with too limited a repertory of motives. We need a wide range of theories to do justice to the richness and diversity of human experience and to the literature that expresses it. Some theories are highly congruent with certain works and some with others, and often several can be employed in studying the same text or aspect of literature. There is a large body of Freudian and Jungian criticism; and the ideas of Alfred Adler, Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich, Melanie Klein, D. W. Winnicott, R. D. Laing, Fritz Perls, Heinz Kohut, Jacques Lacan, and others have also been profitably used in literary studies.

Another psychoanalyst with an important contribution to make is Karen Horney. Her theory fits numerous works from a wide range of periods and cultures and illuminates a variety of literary issues. It yields a distinctive set of insights and is a valuable critical tool.

When I first read Horney in 1959, at the suggestion of a colleague in psychology, I was deeply impressed by her theory. She not only described
my behavior in an immediately recognizable way, but she seemed to have invaded my privacy and to have understood my insecurities, inner conflicts, and unrealistic demands on myself. Above all, she enabled me to comprehend a mysterious change that had taken place in me since the completion of my dissertation.

I was originally a specialist in Victorian fiction who was trained at Johns Hopkins in the explication of texts and the history of ideas. In my doctoral dissertation, I examined George Eliot’s thought in relation to her time and her novels in relation to her ideas. While I was working on my dissertation, I felt that George Eliot had discovered the answer to the modern quest for values, and I expounded her Religion of Humanity with a proselytizing zeal. When I completed the dissertation, I found that although I still felt my reading of George Eliot to be accurate, I was no longer enthralled by her ideas. I could not understand my loss of enthusiasm, which had left me feeling painfully disoriented and uncertain about my beliefs.

Reading Karen Horney helped me to understand what had happened. Horney correlates belief systems with strategies of defense and observes that when our defenses change, so does our philosophy of life. I had had great difficulty writing my dissertation, for reasons that therapy later made clear, and had frequently felt hopeless about completing the Ph.D. Faced with the frustration of my academic ambitions, I found George Eliot’s Religion of Humanity to be exactly what I needed: we give meaning to our lives by living for others rather than for ourselves. But when I finished my dissertation and was told that it ought to be published (Paris 1965), I could once again dream of a glorious career. Since I no longer needed to live for others in order to give meaning to my life, George Eliot’s philosophy lost its appeal. In Horneyan terms, my inability to write my dissertation forced me to abandon my expansive ambitions and to become self-effacing, but on triumphantly completing it, I became expansive once more, and George Eliot’s ideas left me cold. This was an unconscious process of which I first became aware through my reading of Horney and that I understood more fully in the course of psychotherapy.

While in therapy in the early 1960s, I read a great deal of psychoanalytic theory, often using it as an aid to self-analysis. I did not connect it to the study of literature until one memorable day in 1964 when I was teaching Thackeray’s Vanity Fair. Again it was Horney who helped me to understand what was mystifying me. While arguing that the novel is
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full of contradictions and does not make sense thematically, I suddenly remembered Horney's statement that "inconsistencies are as definite an indication of the presence of conflicts as a rise in body temperature is of physical disturbance" (1945, 35). In the next instant I realized that the novel's contradictions become intelligible if we see them as part of a system of inner conflicts. I have been unfolding the implications of that "aha" experience ever since, with profound effects on my view of literature.

As we shall see when examining The Awakening, there are other works like Vanity Fair in which thematic contradictions make it impossible to understand the text in its own terms. Literary critics have often defended the artistic unity of such works by suppressing awareness of inconsistencies or by rationalizing contradictions as part of a controlled structure of tension, irony, and paradox. More recently they have tended to delight in contradictions as evidence of the tendency of all linguistic structures to deconstruct themselves. With the help of Horney's theory we are often able both to recognize inconsistencies as genuine problems and to understand them as parts of an intelligible structure of psychological conflict. Long before the advent of deconstruction, I was showing how literary works almost always contain elements that subvert their dominant themes, but after this deconstructive move I was able to reconstruct them by showing that they still make sense in psychological terms (Paris 1974; see de Beaugrande 1986).

After accounting for the thematic contradictions of Vanity Fair as part of a structure of inner conflicts, I realized that Horney also works well with the major characters in the novel—William Dobbin, Amelia Sedley, and Becky Sharp. As I taught other nineteenth-century novels with Horney in mind, I came to see that they, too, contain highly individualized characters whose motivational systems can be understood with the help of her theory. This recognition eventually led to my first book using Horney—A Psychological Approach to Fiction: Studies in Thackeray, Stendhal, George Eliot, Dostoevsky, and Conrad (1974). Characterization was not my only concern, but I gave a large part of each chapter to a detailed analysis of major figures in Vanity Fair, The Red and the Black, The Mill on the Floss, Notes from Underground, and Lord Jim. In subsequent books, I have taken a Horneyan approach to all of Jane Austen's and all of Shakespeare's major characters (Paris 1978b, 1991a,
The fact that Horney works well with literature from a wide variety of periods and cultures tells us something about both the power of her theory and the enduring features of human behavior.¹

Like most students of literature, I had been taught to analyze literary characters primarily in formal and thematic terms. When I looked at realistically drawn characters from a Horneyan perspective, I came to see that there was an immense amount of psychological detail that literary criticism had simply ignored. These characters were not simply functions in a text or encoded messages from the author but were imagined human beings whose thoughts, feelings, and actions made sense in motivational terms. I had not been taught that literature is about human beings, human relationships, and human experiences; but outside of the academy one of the primary appeals of great literature has always been its portrayal of characters who seem to be of the same nature as ourselves. A psychological understanding of these characters makes them all the more fascinating.

When I began discussing the psychology of literary characters, I quickly encountered a great deal of resistance to this procedure among my fellow critics. It has become a dogma of modern theory that literary characters do not belong to the real world in which people have internal motivations but to a fictional world in which everything they are and do is part of a larger structure whose logic is determined by purely artistic considerations. The most recent schools of criticism continue to see characters in primarily functional terms, with many of them attacking the whole concept of a self that can be represented.

I believe that the rejection of the idea that literary characters can be analyzed in ways similar to those in which we analyze real people has been an enormous critical error (for fuller accounts of my argument, see Paris 1974 and 1991b). The objections to this procedure apply to some kinds of characters but not to others. It is essential to recognize that there are different types of characterization requiring different strategies of interpretation.

A useful taxonomy is that of Scholes and Kellogg (1966), which distinguishes between aesthetic, illustrative, and mimetic characterization. Aesthetic characters are stock types who may be understood primarily in terms of their technical functions and their formal and dramatic effects. Illustrative characters are “concepts in anthropoid shape or fragments of the human psyche parading as whole human beings.” We try to understand “the principle they illustrate through their actions
in a narrative framework" (88). Behind realistic literature there is a strong "psychological impulse" that "tends toward the presentation of highly individualized figures who resist abstraction and generalization" (101). When we encounter a fully drawn mimetic character, "we are justified in asking questions about his motivations based on our knowledge of the ways in which real people are motivated" (87). A mimetic character usually has aesthetic and illustrative functions, but numerous details have been called forth by the author's desire to make the character lifelike, complex, and inwardly intelligible, and these will go unnoticed if we interpret the character only in functional terms.

One of the most frequent objections to motivational analysis is that it takes characters out of the work and tries to understand them in their own right. Given the nature of mimetic characterization, this is not an unreasonable procedure. Mimetic characters are part of the fictional world in which they exist, but they are also autonomous beings with an inner logic of their own. They are, in E. M. Forster's phrase, "creations inside a creation" (1927, 64) who tend to go their own way as the author becomes absorbed in imagining human beings, motivating their behavior, and supplying their reactions to the situations in which they have been placed.

There has been a great deal of resistance among critics not only to regarding literary characters as imagined human beings, but also to using modern psychoanalytic theories to analyze them. One objection has been that earlier authors could not possibly have conceived of their characters in the terms we are using to talk about them. My reply to this is that the authors had to make sense of human behavior for themselves, as we all do, and that they drew upon the conceptual systems of their day. To see their characters in terms of those systems is to recover what may have been the authors' conscious understanding of them, but that does not do justice to their mimetic achievement or make the characters intelligible to us. To interpret Hamlet in terms of humor's psychology does not explain his behavior to me.

We cannot identify our authors' conceptions of their characters with the characters they have actually created, even if we could be certain of what their conceptions were. One of the features of mimetic characters is that they have a life independent of their creators and that our understanding of them will change, along with our changing conceptions of human behavior. Even though the characters will outlive every interpretation, each age has to make sense of them for itself, using its own
modes of explanation. Any theory we use will be culture-bound and reductive; still, we must use some theory, consciously or not, to satisfy our appetite for conceptual understanding.

I believe that psychoanalytic theory has much to contribute to our understanding of literature and that it permits a conceptual clarity that cannot be derived from literature alone. But literature has a contribution of at least equal importance to make to the theories that help us to understand it. There is a reciprocal relation, I propose, between psychoanalytic theory and the literary presentation of the phenomena it describes. Theory provides categories of understanding that help us to recover the intuitions of the great writers about the workings of the human psyche, and these intuitions, once recovered, become part of our conceptual understanding of life. We gain greater insight into human behavior because of the richness of artistic presentation. Even the most sophisticated theories are thin compared to the complex portrayals of characters and relationships that we find in literary masterpieces, and they are thinner yet, of course, when compared with the density of life. While discussing an aspect of vindictiveness in *Neurosis and Human Growth*, Karen Horney observed that “great writers have intuitively grasped [this phenomenon] and have presented it in more impressive forms than a psychiatrist can hope to do” (198). Taken together psychoanalytic theory and literature give us a fuller grasp of human experience than either provides by itself.

The analyst and the artist often deal with the same phenomena, but in significantly different ways. Psychoanalytic theory gives us *formulations about* human behavior, whereas literature gives us *truth to* experience. Because of its concrete, dramatic quality, literature enables us not only to observe people other than ourselves but also to enter into their mental universe, to discover what it feels like to *be* these people and to confront their life situations. We can gain in this way a phenomenological grasp of experience that cannot be derived from theory alone, and not from case histories either, unless they are also works of art. Because literature provides this kind of knowledge, it has a potentially sensitizing effect, one that is of as much importance to the clinician as it is to the humanist. Literature offers us an opportunity to amplify our experience in a way that can enhance our empathic powers, and because of this it is a valuable aid to clinical training and personal growth.

Another major source of resistance to the psychoanalytic study of character has been its reliance on infantile experience to account for the
behavior of the adult. Since literature usually provides little information about early childhood, psychoanalytic critics tend to infer early experience from adult behavior, which they then account for in terms of infantile origins. Crucial explanatory material is generated out of the premises of their theory, with no corroborating literary evidence except the supposed results of the invented experiences, which were inferred from these results to begin with.

A Horneyan approach is not subject to this difficulty. Although Horney, like Freud, sees psychological problems as originating in early childhood, she does not see the adult as simply repeating earlier patterns, and she does not explain adult behavior through analogies with childhood experience. Once a child begins to adopt defensive strategies, his or her particular system develops under the influence of external factors, which encourage some strategies and discourage others, and of internal necessities, whereby each defensive move requires others in order to maintain its viability. The character structure of the adult has its origins in early childhood, but it is also the product of a complicated evolutionary history, and it can be understood in terms of the present constellation of defenses. Such a synchronic or structural approach is highly suitable for the analysis of literary characters, since we are often supplied with ample information about their existing defenses, however sketchy their childhoods may be. Because it describes the kinds of phenomena that are actually portrayed in literature, it permits us to stick to the words on the page, to explicate the text.

As I have continued to look at literature from a Horneyan perspective, one discovery has led to another, about both the nature of literature and the possible applications of the approach. I began by using the theory to make sense of thematic contradictions but soon came to appreciate its power to illuminate character. Recognizing the psychological complexity of many of the protagonists of nineteenth-century fiction led me to change my ideas about characterization; and as I read and taught works from a variety of periods and national literatures, I found that mimetic characterization is more widespread than generally thought and that Horney’s theory works well with writers from many cultures. My selection of texts in part 2 of this book is designed to show, among other things, that a Horneyan approach is applicable to works from Antigone to The End of the Road.
Employing a Horneyan approach to character has led me to perceive that the great mimetic creations almost always subvert their aesthetic and thematic functions. As we have seen, E. M. Forster describes “round” characters as “creations inside a creation.” They “arrive when evoked,” he says, “but full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have these numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book” (1927, 64). That seems exactly right to me. As wholes in themselves, imagined human beings can be understood in terms of their inner motivational systems, and when they are so understood, they appear to be inharmonious toward the larger whole of which they are a part. They are in conflict with their roles in the plot and with the author’s rhetorical treatment of their experience.

When I first became aware of the incongruities between form and theme on the one hand and mimesis on the other, I felt that they were failures of art, but I have found them to be almost inescapable in realistic literature and have come to regard them as a concomitant of great characterization. Round characters create a dilemma for their creators. If they “are given complete freedom,” says Forster, “they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check, they revenge themselves by dying, and destroy it by intestinal decay” (1927, 64). The artists’ character-creating impulses work against their efforts to shape and interpret experience, and they must choose between allowing their characters to come alive and kick the book to pieces or killing their characters by subordinating them to the main scheme of the work. The great realists choose fidelity to their psychological intuitions over the demands of theme and form, usually without knowing that they are doing so.

There are a number of reasons why realistic characterization is almost bound to subvert a work’s formal and thematic structures. As Northrop Frye observes, there are “two poles of literature,” the mimetic, with its “tendency to verisimilitude and accuracy of description,” and the mythic, with its “tendency to tell a story . . . about characters who can do anything” (1957, 51). Western literature has moved steadily from the mythic to the mimetic pole, but the movement toward mimesis has affected only content; literary form is derived from mythic patterns. Thus even in the most realistic works, “we see the same structural principles” that we find in their pure form in myth (136). There is a
built-in conflict between myth and mimesis: “the realistic writer soon finds that the requirements of literary form and plausible content always fight against each other” (Frye 1963, 36).

Literary form and realistic characterization involve incompatible canons of decorum and universes of discourse. Realistic characterization aims at verisimilitude; it follows the logic of motivation, of probability, of cause and effect. But, as Frye observes, when judged by the canons of probability, “every inherited convention of plot in literature is more or less mad” (1963, 36). Form and mimesis arouse different sets of expectations within the reader. Mimetic characters create an appetite for a consistently realistic world. We want their behavior to make sense and their fates to be commensurate with the laws of probability. Realism does not round out a shape, however, and mimetic characters are often set into manipulated plots that arrive at rather arbitrary conclusions. One of our cravings, either for realism or closure, tends to be frustrated at the end.

In many realistic works, the formal pattern is closed, despite the improbabilities this creates, and the characters remain true to life, subverting that closure. In Jane Austen’s novels, for example, the happy endings demanded by the comic structure seem much less satisfactory when we become aware of her protagonists’ unresolved psychological problems and the deficiencies in their relationships (see Paris 1978b). One of the most common formal patterns in fiction is the education plot, based on the archetype of the fortunate fall, in which the protagonists err because of their flaws, suffer because of their errors, and achieve wisdom and maturity because of their suffering. When we analyze the characters in Horneyan terms, we usually find that their growth is an illusion and that if they have undergone a great change it is from one destructive solution to another. The education plot and mimetic characterization are usually at odds with each other. This often gives rise to critical controversies, the sources of which can be understood through a Horneyan approach.

It is important to distinguish between the psychological portrait of a character and the rhetoric by which the character is surrounded. By rhetoric I mean what we normally think of as theme and a good deal more besides. The rhetoric consists of all the devices an author employs to influence readers’ moral and intellectual responses to a character, their sympathy and antipathy, their emotional closeness or distance (see
When we understand mimetic characters in motivational terms, we usually find ourselves responding in ways that are different from those that the rhetoric seeks to induce and taking issue with the author's interpretations and judgments.

The great psychological realists have the capacity to see far more than they can conceptualize. Their grasp of inner dynamics and of interpersonal relations is so subtle and profound that concrete representation is the only mode of discourse that can do it justice. When they comment on what they have represented or assign their characters illustrative roles, they are limited by the inadequacy of abstractions generally and of the conceptual systems available to them. Their interpretations of their characters are often wrong and almost always oversimple, in contrast to their intuitive grasp of the characters' psychology. The more we recover their intuitions and do justice to their mimetic achievement, the more disparities we perceive between their representation of human behavior and their interpretation of it.

Psychological analysis leads us to judgments that are in conflict with those of the author because it enables us to see the destructiveness of the solutions that have been glorified by the rhetoric. Writers tend to validate characters whose defensive strategies are similar to their own and to satirize those who have different solutions. The rhetoric of the work and sometimes even the action are designed to gain sympathy for the life-styles and values of the favored characters. Changes from a condemned defensive strategy to an approved one are celebrated as education and growth, although the new solution is often as unhealthy as the one that has been discarded. Insofar as the characters are mimetically portrayed, we are given an opportunity to understand them in our own terms and to arrive at our own judgments. When we arrive at different interpretations and judgments, the author's spell is broken, the characters are seen to rebel, and we experience a disparity between rhetoric and mimesis.

To be more precise, we experience a disparity between the author's interpretations and judgments and our own. The mimetic component of literature can never be definitively interpreted, by the author or anyone else. By virtue of its richness, it escapes all conceptual schemes, and conceptual schemes are constantly changing. I employ a Horneyan approach because it satisfies my appetite for clarity here and now. I am aware of the epistemological problems, but I choose to make as much sense of things as I can, according to my best lights, rather than to dwell
on the uncertainty of knowledge. Although I shall not be constantly calling attention to the fact, let it be understood that I know that I am presenting my version of reality, which I hope will be of use to some others in the construction of theirs.

Once psychological analysis of mimetic characters led me to resist authorial rhetoric, I began to interpret the rhetoric itself from a psychological perspective and to see it (along with much else) as a reflection of the psyche of the implied author. When the rhetoric consistently glorifies characters who embrace a particular solution while criticizing those who have adopted others, it reveals the implied author's own defenses, repressions, and blind spots. In works where the rhetoric is inconsistent, such as *Vanity Fair* or *The Awakening*, it reveals the implied author's inner conflicts. It is possible to psychoanalyze not only the implied authors of individual texts but also the authorial personality that can be inferred from many or all of a writer's works. I have done this with Thomas Hardy (Paris 1976a), Jane Austen (Paris 1978b), and William Shakespeare (Paris 1991a). The next step would be psychobiography, in which texts could be used as a source of insight into the inner life of their creator. Karen Horney's theory has been employed in this way by Lawrance Thompson in his monumental biography of Robert Frost (1966, 1970, 1976), and many other writers would be illuminated by Horneyan analysis.

As I have said, a Horneyan approach has led me to see that there are almost bound to be disparities between rhetoric and mimesis. I have come to realize that these disparities can be either exacerbated or reduced by the choice of narrative technique. Omniscient narration tends to exacerbate them because although omniscient narrators present themselves as authoritative sources of interpretation and judgment, they are not. First person narration reduces the disparities because the interpretations and judgments belong to a character and therefore are clearly subjective. First person narration creates other problems, however, such as those of reliability. How do we know the degree to which the narrator's perspective is endorsed by the implied author? How do we know whether the narrator's interpretations and judgments are trustworthy? And, most perplexing, how do we know if the narrator's accounts of self and others are accurate? In omniscient narration, we believe what the narrator *shows* us about the characters, even if we are skeptical about what we are *told*. But in first person narration, can we believe the narrator's accounts of self and others, even when they are presented
dramatically? The perceptions and recollections of an anxious, defensive, insecure narrator may well be distorted.

I have found that both omniscient and first person narrators require psychological analysis. The omniscient narrator's interpretations and judgments are a reflection of the character structure of the implied author, who has a vested interest in giving a certain rhetorical spin to the story. First person narrators are usually characters with profound psychological problems who are engaged in various forms of self-punishment and self-justification. Understanding their needs and defenses can go a long way toward helping us to detect their distortions and assess their reliability. As I have suggested, a Horneyan approach to narration often gives us a great deal of insight into the psyche of the implied author.

Some works, such as *Wuthering Heights*, employ multiple narrators. First person narrators often seem to be speaking for the author, but the use of multiple narrators tends to relativize the narration, especially when the narrators have differing perspectives. Techniques such as this that lead to the disappearance of the author can diminish or eliminate the disparity between rhetoric and mimesis, since the rhetorical stance of the implied author becomes difficult or impossible to define. The implied author may be recovered through psychological analysis, however, if we see the multiple narrators as expressing conflicting components of the author's psyche and consider the motives behind this choice of narrative technique.

The studies of individual works in the body of this book will illustrate most of the applications of a Horneyan approach that I have discussed, and I shall suggest others in the conclusion. In part 2, I shall examine characters and relationships in works by Ibsen, Barth, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Sophocles. The texts I have selected display most of the defensive strategies Horney describes and show the forms they have taken in various periods and cultures. These works are bound together by a number of recurring motifs, such as living through others, morbid dependency, suicide or suicidal tendencies, and searching for glory, all of which Horney's theory illuminates. I shall not consider the works chronologically but in an order that facilitates comparison.

In part 3, I shall continue to examine characters, relationships, and recurring motifs, but I shall also consider the protagonists in relation to rhetoric and plot and shall explore the ways in which mimesis functions as a subversive force. I shall focus on six novels: *Great Expectations,*
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Jane Eyre, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Madame Bovary, The Awakening, and Wuthering Heights. Some of these novels display the education pattern that I have described above, while others have a vindication pattern, based on the Cinderella archetype, in which a virtuous but persecuted protagonist finally achieves the status and approval he or she deserves. Both of these patterns are supported by the rhetoric and undermined by the mimesis, which (as I interpret it) shows the educated characters to be compulsive and immature and the vindicated characters to be less deserving of glorification than the author would have us believe.

I shall compare the novels in terms of these formal patterns and also in terms of their narrative techniques. Great Expectations and Jane Eyre have unreliable first person narrators, The Mayor of Casterbridge and The Awakening have problematic omniscient narration, and Madame Bovary has an omniscient narrator who is not as invisible as many, including the author, have claimed. Wuthering Heights avoids most of the difficulties found in the other novels by its use of multiple narrators. The problem here is to locate the implied author and to get some sense of where she stands in relation to the characters and their values. I believe that a Horneyan approach can help us to solve this problem.

In my discussions of literature, I shall use Horney's theory as a source of insight rather than as a grid upon which to lay texts. Although influenced by Horney, the readings I offer are mine. They are not the inevitable result of the application of her theory; indeed, I sometimes disagree with her analysis of a literary character.

I believe that psychoanalytic theory illuminates literature, that literature enriches theory, and that combining theory and literature enhances both our intellectual and our empathic understanding of human behavior. This process involves not just theory and literature but also our own personalities and our insight into ourselves. There is a triangular relationship between literature, theory, and the individual interpreter. Our literary and theoretical interests reflect our own character, the way in which we use theory depends on the degree to which it has become emotionally as well as intellectually meaningful to us, and what we are able to perceive depends on our personality, our theoretical perspective, and our access to our inner life.

I have found Horney's theory to be a powerful instrument of analysis,
and I am eager to share this discovery with others so that their understanding of literature and life might also be enriched by it. I know, however, that no one will entirely agree with my readings, just as I never entirely agree with anyone else's, and that the application of Horney's theory might yield different results in other hands.

For those unfamiliar with Horney or with my previous expositions of her ideas, I provide an account of her mature theory in the following chapter. Those who know her theory well may wish to proceed directly to chapter 3.