Literary Identification from Charlotte Bronte to Tsitsi Dangarembga

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The Victorian novel of formation, with which I began, negotiates among competing models of life story—the providential, the picaresque, and the psychoanalytic. The post-Enlightenment rise of a subject defined more by interiority—self-regulation, self-narration, and affect—than relations of external hierarchy or control, along with the growth of evolutionary narratives, reshaped the English novel. Within these modernizing psychological contexts, the subject could less plausibly be represented as an entity given entire (as by God) or as a tabula rasa inscribed by collision with largely external events (the associationist view). The life history of such a psychologized subject, whether historical or fictional, could not run smoothly along the well-worn tracks of providential plotting according to which, in Oscar Wilde’s mocking fin-de-siècle summary of fiction, “The good are rewarded and the evil punished” (Importance of Being Earnest II.i), nor develop accretively through the concatenation of externally induced experiences, as in the picaresque.

Thus the connection between the novel of formation and the narrative of psychoanalysis that I have suggested here is not adventitious; the two share a historical context for their development. The psychomachia that Freud stages in the theater of the self, populated by “model, object, helper, opponent” (Group Psychology 1); the “good” and “bad” objects internalized by the Kleinian psyche; the “abiding sense of oneself as associated with, positioned in terms of, related to, a matrix of other people” (Mitchell 33) in relational theory: all of these encounters, embodied for
psychoanalytic practice in the interchange between analysand and analyst, are individuated in the novel of formation in relations among characters, readers, and authors. In the historical moment at which the subject begins to acquire its autonomy, psychoanalytic formulations of identification suggests its concomitant dependency, its uneven and partial composition through the incorporation and loss of other selves and in the recognition of the self by the other. It is the conflict, partiality, and loss inherent in identification, as much as its affirmations, that have allowed post-Victorian readers and writers to continue to respond to the invitations proferred by the novel of formation.

Because narratives of formation are about, and solicit, the intimacy of identification and mutual recognition, these invitations, I have suggested, are themselves particularly intimate. But just as relations of identification can include hostile projections as well as affirming reflections, so every occasion of recognition also has the potential to be an occasion of misrecognition. This tension is apparent in Jeanette Winterson’s dismissive response to the young woman in the bookstore who, mistaking Winterson’s seductive authorial persona for an invitation to group solidarity, associates her with Radclyffe Hall: “Our work has nothing in common.” Winterson objects to being expected to “shar[e] a bed with a dead body. [A] bed in the shape of a book” (AO 103), but she happily invites into Art Objects many dead bodies—Woolf, Stein, T. S. Eliot. In fact, identification with a dead author, like Winterson’s with Woolf, the “complete,” untouchable poet-ancestor, might seem more secure than a similar relation with living ones, since the dead cannot evade or contest it. But—as suggested by Winterson’s attempts to reinscribe Woolf in her own image and defend her from competing interpretations—the dead do walk, animated by the inevitable multiplicity of their own representations and the representations of other readers and writers. Relations of identification and recognition can never be fixed, finished, or individually possessed.

These ambivalences of authorship (seeking recognition, fearing appropriation) and readership (identification as homage, identification as aggression) are writ large, for contemporary readers, in Winterson’s provocative prose and in the representation of queer subjects, for whose identities the question of recognition is, more than ever, so visibly at stake. The current erosion, as well, of boundaries between private and public forums of self-representation, and new modes of circulation of authors in the public sphere (through blogs and websites, for example), apparently have the potential to make relations of identification and demands for recognition more immediate and more fraught. Fictional characters, too, subject to
various forms of repurposing, remediation, and reanimation, can challenge our identifications of, and with, them. In the postmodern romps of Jasper Fforde, such as Lost in a Book and The Eyre Affair, real readers can enter into fictional worlds, mingling with a Jane Eyre who fails to marry Rochester, or a Miss Havisham who races cars.

But as I have shown, the dynamism of literary relations of identification is not a specifically postmodern development but has always been part of the genre of the novel of formation. George Eliot is as self-reflexive and intertextual as Jeanette Winterson, and her relations with her readers are just as vexed. When Eliot, in The Mill on the Floss, both invokes and then distances herself from other narratives of female formation; when Beauvoir continually recasts, in fiction, memoirs, letters, and essays, her representation of the development of a female intellectual; when Brontë and Dangarembga follow narratives of formation with narratives of profound alienation—all these authorial gestures combine an invitation to identification, a desire for recognition, and an effort to control the effect and direction of both. When Maggie Tulliver refuses to finish Corinne, when Lynne Sharon Schwartz first attempts to inhabit, and then redirects, the nineteenth-century narrative of female formation; when Lucy Potter claims to identify with Milton’s Lucifer rather than Brontë’s Lucy Snowe—all these gestures suggest both the attraction and the threat of readerly identification and the ways in which they continue.

That attraction is neither timeless nor inevitable. From The Rise of the Novel to “The Death of the Author,” critics have emphasized not only the temporality but also the mortality of genres and styles of reading. Genres are historically and culturally bound: their rules of composition, the expectations that readers bring to them, the conventions by which their representations are legible—all are subject to obsolescence. Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, M. M. Bakhtin concludes a discussion of the “reaccentuation” of the novel’s “images and languages” from one era to another on an optimistic note: “Great novelistic images continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation; they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their birth” (422). On the other hand, as Terry Eagleton warns sternly, “Anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature—Shakespeare, for example—can cease to be literature” (9); and any genre can cease to speak intelligibly to readers or authors. For the novel of formation, however, that moment has not yet arrived.