Author and Character: The Notion of the Loss of Authorial Control in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Fiction

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In *Aspects of the Novel* E. M. Forster implies that the characters primarily have their own lives, trying to achieve freedom from the author’s control: “The characters arrive when evoked, 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 often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book. They ‘run away,’ they ‘get out of hand’: they are creations inside a creation, and often inharmonious towards it” (74). Forster’s representative of a character granted this autonomy is Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders: “*Moll Flanders* . . . shall stand as our example of a novel in which a character is everything and is given freest play” (68). However, this lust for autonomy on the side of the characters, Forster argues, is a potential menace to the fictional narrative: “if they are given complete freedom they kick the book to pieces” (74). Moll is allowed to enjoy freedom from authorial control because “[n]othing matters but the heroine” (68) in the novel: “What interested Defoe was the heroine, and the form of his book proceeds naturally out of her character” (63-64). Yet this lust for autonomy on the side of the characters must be controlled in “more complicated novels,” where they have to “fit in with other aspects of fiction” (69). Forster’s example is Jane Austen’s novels where “the characters are inter-dependent” (73). For example, unlike Moll, who “stands in an open space like a tree” (68), Miss Bates and Emma
Woodhouse are “like bushes in a shrubbery,” which “must exercise a mutual restraint” (74). Forster says that the need for plot arises in such novels where “the characters cannot spread themselves” (74): 

In vain it points out to these unwieldy creatures the advantages of the triple process of complication, crisis, and solution so persuasively expounded by Aristotle. A few of them rise and comply, and a novel which ought to have been a play is the result. But there is no general response. They want to sit apart and brood or something, and the plot (whom I here visualize as a sort of higher government official) is concerned at their lack of public spirit: “This will not do,” it seems to say. “Individualism is a most valuable quality; indeed my own position depends upon individuals; I have always admitted as much freely. Nevertheless there are certain limits, and those limits are being overstepped. Characters must not brood too long, they must not waste time running up and down ladders in their own insides, they must contribute, or higher interests will be jeopardized.” (93)

Here the narrative artifice of plot functions as a restraint on the enormous vitality of autonomous character, which is potentially disruptive to the narrative.

In Aspects of the Novel George Meredith often appears as an example of a master of plot: “He [Meredith] is the finest contriver that English fiction has ever produced, and any lecture on plot must do homage to him” (97-98). In praising Meredith’s mastery of plot, Forster says: “Meredith did know what the novel could stand, where the plot could dun the characters for a contribution, where it must let them function as they liked” (101-02). While praising Meredith for his ability to know when to leave the characters alone to act as they like and when to intervene to check their independent vitality,
Forster criticizes Thomas Hardy for giving overriding priority to plot at the sacrifice of the vitality of the characters: “Sometimes a plot triumphs too completely. The characters have to suspend their natures at every turn, or else are so swept away by the course of Fate that our sense of their reality is weakened. We shall find instances of this in a writer who is far greater than Meredith, and yet less successful as a novelist—Thomas Hardy” (100). A case in point is *Jude the Obscure*: “there is some vital problem that has not been answered, or even posed, in the misfortunes of Jude the Obscure. In other words the characters have been required to contribute too much to the plot; except in their rustic humour, their vitality has been impoverished, they have gone dry and thin” (101). Meredith’s plots, Forster argues, often cause shock to attract the reader, but this shock is “followed by the feeling, ‘Oh, that’s all right,’” which is “a sign that all is well with the plot” (98). Meredith’s plots do not give out “the sound of hammer-strokes” (100) often heard in Hardy’s plots—the sound which may allow the reader to perceive the fictionality of the narrative—because Meredith’s characterization is so adequate as to offer the reader good grounds for thinking that the plots are plausible: “As far as characters go, Meredith plays with his cards on the table” (98).

Hardy was often regarded as being on the side of the artifice of plot not only by his enemies who, like Forster, criticized him for ordering the characters to acquiesce in the requirements of the plot and exposing the fictionality of the narrative, but by his supporters. R. H. Hutton, for example, praised Hardy for having imposed his a priori fatalistic views upon *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*: “Mr Hardy has written one of his most powerful novels, perhaps the most powerful which he ever wrote, to illustrate his conviction that not only is there no Providence guiding individual men and women in
the right way, but that, in many cases at least, there is something like a malign
fate which draws them out of the right way into the wrong way” (Clarke 1: 184). Hardy’s response to such criticism is well illustrated in “Preface to the
Fifth Edition” of Tess—the first one-volume edition published in September
1892. In this preface Hardy emphasizes the absence of controlling ideas by
quoting from Schiller’s letter to Goethe (1795):

“They are those who seek only their own ideas in a representation,
and prize that which should be as higher than what is. The cause of
the dispute, therefore, lies in the very first principles, and it would be
utterly impossible to come to an understanding with them.” And again:
“As soon as I observe that any one, when judging of poetical
representations, considers anything more important than the inner
Necessity and Truth, I have done with him.” (TD 5)

Schiller’s main concern at a time when he wrote this letter was the antithesis
between “naive” and “sentimental” poetry. In his essay “On Naive and
Sentimental Poetry” (1795-6) Schiller argued that unlike “sentimental” or
reflective mode of poetic production, in which a poet is inclined to
philosophical analysis, a “naive” or natural mode of creativity depends on
intuition and spontaneity. The art of “naive” poetry is “based on eternal
principles of nature and follows laws akin to those of nature itself” (Nisbet
22). Nature, for Schiller, was “nothing but the voluntary presence, the
subsistence of things on their own, their existence in accordance with their
own immutable laws,” “the inner necessity,” or “the eternal unity with
themselves” (Nisbet 180-81). The “simplicity, truth and necessity of nature”
in the naive genius should not be subjected to the author’s arbitrary will or
“the freedom of his fantasy and his understanding” (Nisbet 193). The naive
genius, therefore, cannot exercise control over the poetry nor predict how it
will turn out:

It [Naive poetry] is a lucky throw of the dice, standing in no need of improvement if successful, but equally incapable of any if it should fail. In his feeling the whole work of the naive genius is acquitted; here is his strength and his limit. If he has not at once felt poetically, i. e., not at once completely humanly, then this shortcoming can no longer be repaired by art. Criticism can only afford him an insight into his mistake, but it cannot supply any beauty in its place. By his nature the naive genius must do everything; by his freedom he can achieve little; and it will fulfil its essence so long as nature in him should operate according to an inner necessity. Now everything indeed is necessary that takes place by nature: this applies equally to every product of the naive genius (from whom nothing is farther removed than arbitrary action) be it never so successful. (214-15)

For Hardy, too, anything that might prevent the author from conforming to the “inner Necessity” of nature—such as a moral position or a controlling thought—should not be introduced because it might avoid the self-generation of an internally logical narrative sequence, or, to borrow from Explanatory Note to the first book-edition, “a true sequence of things” (TD 3).

One may notice that this is a position as far removed as possible from the aesthetic that Forster and Hutton found in Hardy. The aesthetic Hardy often aimed at for his novels was the lack of authorial creative control over the fictional narrative. It is interesting to note here that the notion of the removal of the author from the creative process coincides with that of autonomous character. This is clearly shown in Hardy’s essay “Candour in English Fiction,” which was published between the magazine editors’ refusal of the manuscript of Tess and his first submission of the revised version to
the Graphic. This essay was mainly concerned with the hampering effect of Grundyism upon the contemporary novel:

The opening scenes of the would-be great story may, in a rash moment, have been printed in some popular magazine before the remainder is written; as it advances month by month the situations develop, and the writer asks himself, what will his characters do next? What would probably happen to them, given such beginnings? On his life and conscience, though he had not foreseen the thing, only one event could possibly happen, and that therefore he should narrate, as he calls himself a faithful artist. But, though pointing a fine moral, it is just one of those issues which are not to be mentioned in respectable magazines and select libraries. The dilemma then confronts him, he must either whip and scourge those characters into doing something contrary to their natures, to produce the spurious effect of their being in harmony with social forms and ordinances, or, by leaving them alone to act as they will, he must bring down the thunders of respectability upon his head, not to say ruin his editor, his publisher, and himself.

What he often does, indeed can scarcely help doing in such a strait, is, belie his literary conscience, do despite to his best imaginative instincts by arranging a dénouement which he knows to be indescribably unreal and meretricious, but dear to the Grundyist and subscriber. If the true artist ever weeps it probably is then, when he first discovers the fearful price that he has to pay for the privilege of writing in the English language—no less a price than the complete extinction, in the mind of every mature and penetrating reader, of sympathetic belief in his personages. (SPNP 258)
The central argument of this essay is that the author must reject the demand for concessions from conservative editors and readers in order to leave the characters “alone to act as they will.” The “only one event [that] could possibly happen” is thus determined not by the author but by the characters, whose “natures” he or she must follow to the conclusion.

Many critics have insisted on seeing Hardy as a fatalistic writer dooming his characters to crushing misfortune with his teleological design preceding the narrative. One of the few critics who have taken a position against such criticism is Virginia Woolf. In “The Novels of Thomas Hardy” Woolf places Hardy among the “unconscious writers”:

Some writers are born conscious of everything; others are unconscious of many things. Some, like Henry James and Flaubert, are able not merely to make the best use of the spoil their gifts bring in, but control their genius in the act of creation; they are aware of all the possibilities of every situation, and are never taken by surprise. The unconscious writers, on the other hand, like Dickens and Scott, seem suddenly and without their own consent to be lifted up and swept onwards. The wave sinks and they cannot say what has happened or why. Among them—it is the source of his strength and of his weakness—we must place Hardy. His own word, “moments of vision,” exactly describes those passages of astonishing beauty and force which are to be found in every book that he wrote. With a sudden quickening of power which we cannot foretell, nor he, it seems, control, a single scene breaks off from the rest. (Clarke 3: 231-32)

For Woolf, Hardy is at the strongest when in “moments of vision,” that is, in a state of unconsciousness where he himself is not “quite aware of what he [does]” (Clarke 3: 232). This novelistic experience of being in a state of
unconsciousness is fairly common to those who respect the idea of the removal of the author from the creative process. Indeed, insofar as novelists disclaim any responsibility for determining what would probably happen to the characters of their imagination, they seem to have no choice left but to resort to the authority of the unconscious, whose power seems to be concerned less with the intellectual reasoning faculties than with the instinctive psyche, to claim the legitimacy of their representation of the characters. In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* Henry James, for example, wrote:

I had, no doubt, a groping instinct for the right complications, since I am quite unable to track the footsteps of those that constitute, as the case stands, the general situation exhibited. They are there, for what they are worth, and as numerous as might be; but my memory, I confess, is a blank as to how and whence they came.

I seem to myself to have waked up one morning in possession of them—of Ralph Touchett and his parents, of Madame Merle, of Gilbert Osmond and his daughter and his sister, of Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood and Miss Stackpole, the definite array of contributions to Isabel Archer’s history. I recognised them, I knew them, they were the numbered pieces of my puzzle, the concrete terms of my “plot.” It was as if they had simply, by an impulse of their own, floated into my ken, and all in response to my primary question: “Well, what will she do?” Their answer seemed to be that if I would trust them they would show me; on which, with an urgent appeal to them to make it at least as interesting as they could, I trusted them. They were like the group of attendants and entertainers who come down by train when people in the country give a party; they represented the contract for carrying the party on. That was an excellent relation with them—a possible
one even with so broken a reed (from her slightness of cohesion) as Henrietta Stackpole. (2: 1081)

James stands as Woolf’s example of a consummate artist full of conscious artistry, but here James trusts his characters enough to give them carte blanche to direct the course of the narrative. For James, it may have been difficult thus to appeal to any other authority than that of “a groping instinct” to claim the rightness of the “complications” that contributed to Isabel Archer’s story.

The novelistic experience of relinquishing control over the narrative is vital to Woolf’s aesthetic, too. Her most famous allusion to this state of experience occurs in “Modern Fiction”: “The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will, but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccably that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour” (CE 2: 106). It would be interesting to note that for Woolf, too, the notion of the lack of authorial control cannot be separated from that of autonomous character. In “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” which is, together with “Modern Fiction,” often regarded as a classic of modernist statements, Woolf wrote:

Here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her. I believe that all novels begins with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved. (Woman’s Essays 74-75)
Woolf's enemy is often conscious authorial mediation, which, as in Hardy's novels, replaces “moments of vision” with “long stretches of plain daylight” (Clarke 3: 232). Borrowing from Hardy’s statement in “Preface to the Fifth Edition” of Tess that “a novel is an impression, not an argument” (TD 5), Woolf criticizes him for self-consciously tampering with the straight impressions he received from his characters:

Certainly it is true to say of him that, at his greatest, he gives us impressions; at his weakest, arguments. In The Woodlanders, The Return of the Native, Far from the Madding Crowd, and above all, in The Mayor of Casterbridge, we have Hardy’s impression of life as it came to him without conscious ordering. Let him once begin to tamper with his direct intuitions and his power is gone. “Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?” asks little Abraham as they drive to market with their beehives. Tess replies that they are like “the apples on our stubbard-tree, most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted.” “Which do we live on—a splendid or a blighted one?” “A blighted one,” she replies, or rather the mournful thinker who has assumed her mask speaks for her. The words protrude, cold and raw, like the springs of a machine where we had seen only flesh and blood. We are crudely jolted out of that mood of sympathy which is renewed a moment later when the little cart is run down and we have a concrete instance of the ironical methods which rule our planet. (Clarke 3: 236)

Certainly, however, these proposals for the spontaneous growth of the narrative independent of authorial intention have their limitations. It is generally agreed that central to Woolf’s aesthetic is the element of “personal impression”—one of the vital concepts for modernist writers—and this alone seems to secure the status of the author as medium. Certainly this authorial
mediation is subject to restrictions, for the author is not allowed to modify
the impressions that the characters automatically impose upon him or her.
However, Woolf herself admitted that the impressions that the characters
give to the author differ according to his or her age, country, and temperament:

For example, old Mrs Brown’s character will strike you very differently
according to the age and country in which you happen to be born. . . .
And then besides age and country there is the writer’s temperament to
be considered. You see one thing in character, and I another. You say
it means this, and I that. And when it comes to writing each makes a
further selection on principles of his own. Thus Mrs Brown can be
treated in an infinite variety of ways, according to the age, country,
and temperament of the writer. (Woman’s Essays 75)

The criterion Forster uses in judging the adequacy of the representation of
ccharacer is whether the characters are “real” or not. Forster provides a
definition as to when a character is real: “it [a character] is real when the
novelist knows everything about it. He may not choose to tell us all he knows—
many of the facts, even of the kind we call obvious, may be hidden. But he
will give us the feeling that though the character has not been explained, it is
explicable, and we get from this a reality of a kind we can never get in daily
life” (70). The reality of the characters is not verified by their likeness to
external reality, but by the artistic effect of engendering the “feeling” that
the novelist knows everything about his or her characters or convincing the
reader that they are “real”: “They [Amelia and Emma] are real not because
they are like ourselves . . . but because they are convincing” (69). The
representation of the characters therefore must undergo a process of demiurgic
art of the author to achieve the effect that leads the audience to perceive that
they are “real.”
In “A Chat with the Author of *Tess*,” Hardy, while insisting on his fidelity to Tess’s nature, said: “‘She had done exactly what I think one of her nature under similar circumstances would have done in real life’” (Gibson 39). Here the criterion he uses in determining the course of the narrative seems to be his own understanding of the way things work in the real world. In “The Art of Fiction” James argued against Walter Besant, who made it imperative that “the novelist must write from his experience” (1: 51). For James, one does not need knowledge founded upon actual experience to know the characters of his or her imagination. To know them one only needs to get “a personal, a direct impression” by employing his or her imaginative faculty or “capacity for receiving straight impressions” (1: 50; 59). James’s example is Thackeray’s elder daughter, Anne, who successfully wrote a story of “the nature and way of life of the French Protestant youth”—a “recondite being” of whom she had had no certain knowledge (1: 52). James’s objection to the “laws of fiction” formulated by Besant—writing from personal experiences, having a “conscious moral purpose,” “careful workmanship,” “style,” and “story”—was that these would conform all literary works to certain narrative conventions by mitigating “what might appear to be an extravagance” (1: 51) or checking “an immense increase—a kind of revelation—of freedom” (1: 59). For James, novelistic imagination must be extravagant and free, for one’s conscious control according to the laws of fiction only results in cramming narratives into “conventional, traditional moulds” (1: 58) or cutting short the development of art. This appears to suggest James’s endorsement of what Kendall Walton calls “spontaneous imaginings”—imaginings quite independent of the imaginer’s control. However, James suggests that Anne’s imaginings are not insubordinate to her control:

She had been asked where she learned so much about this recondite
being, she had been congratulated on her peculiar opportunities. These opportunities consisted in her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where, in the household of a pasteur, some of the young Protestants were seated at table round a finished meal. The glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience. She had got her direct personal impression, and she turned out her type. She knew what youth was, and what Protestantism; she also had the advantage of having seen what it was to be French, so that she converted these ideas into a concrete image and produced a reality. Above all, however, she was blessed with the faculty which when you give it an inch takes an ell, and which for the artist is a much greater source of strength than any accident of residence or of place in the social scale. The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education. (1: 52-53)

Anne’s sense of what the French Protestant youth would do next was certainly limited by her own understanding of “what youth was,” “what Protestantism [was],” “what it was to be French,” “the seen,” or “the pattern.” One may say therefore that it is only within the conditions of an authorial understanding of the characters or a “dossier” on each character—“a sort of biography of each of his characters, and everything that they had done and that had happened to them up to the opening of the story” (2: 1022)—that the novelist’s imaginings can be “spontaneous.” The characters determine the course of
the narrative insofar as the author’s understanding of these characters selects or eliminates certain narrative possibilities.

Works Cited


