

Eros & Psyche

THE REPRESENTATION OF PERSONALITY
IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË,
CHARLES DICKENS, AND GEORGE ELIOT

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Introduction

The present study comprises a series of readings in what used to be called the psychological novel. "Psychological novel," it is clear, will no longer serve. It gives the air of naming something precise, but nothing so precise ever existed. There was no single literary current and no single subject carried on that current. Instead, there was something far more interesting: a succession of attempts throughout the Victorian period to extend the emotional range of prose fiction and to refine the portrayal of mental life. Accordingly, the large issue that gives this study its direction and its point is the fictive representation of personality in three Victorian novelists. It is too large a problem to approach all at once, and the title indicates a first attempt to divide the field.

Eros and psyche serve here, not as technical terms, but as heavily laden images which suggest a broad distinction that the course of this study will attempt to sharpen. In our age eros has been narrowed from love to sexuality, from a divinity to an instinct, but for my purposes it is important to resist any reduction and to let it retain all its sugges-

tions, since surely one of the most telling features of the term is its capacity to gather so many rich meanings. Initially, then, eros will signify affective experience in a very general sense: love, desire, need, or mere objectless yearning, in so far as they involve impulses towards emotional expression. As we shall come to see, eros endures many vicissitudes in Victorian fiction, and its extension must be kept wide, so that it will collect all that we need to study.

With *psyche*, too, it will be best initially to keep the range of meanings broad, and to turn the diversity of connotations to advantage. Butterfly, bird, breath, smoke – *psyche* has traditionally suggested the evanescent or incorporeal aspects of subjective experience. It has been more idea than thing, more outline than substance. If eros often appears as amorphous energy, *psyche* is frequently pure form, and the task for any representation of personality is, as it were, to wed eros to *psyche*, that is, to give form to emotional life. To put the issue in these terms is to make clear that the problem is at once aesthetic and psychological. In their furthest metaphoric reach, eros and *psyche* suggest not simply love and soul, nor sex and mind, but expression and structure, and I will frequently avail myself of this metaphor in order to remind my reader of the relationship between the form of personality and the form of literature.

"What is fiction," asked George Eliot, "other than an arrangement of events or feigned correspondences according to predominant feeling?"¹ What, indeed? But no relation is more subtle than that between the arrangement of events and the expression of feeling. Northrop Frye has pointed out that "every work of literature has both a fictional and a thematic aspect." Frye uses "fictional" to indicate a concern with plot, a concern which leads the reader to ask, "How is this story going to turn out?" By "thematic" he means the conceptual interest which provokes the question, "What is the *point* of this story?"² Frye is clearly right to distinguish these two aspects of literary art, but if we are going to anatomize, we had better include the entire body. In addition to its thematic and fictional concerns, we must also consider the expressive organization of a work, not only its structure of events and ideas, but its structure of feeling. To Frye's two questions one can reasonably append a third, "What is the complex of feeling that this work expresses?" Part of the enterprise here is to raise this third question.

No one is likely to deny that literature and emotion are deeply

entangled. The difficulty begins when we try to *locate* literary emotion. Our tendency is to look to the author, to the reader, or to the individual fictional character – and this because we incline to regard emotion as a property of individual psychologies, fictional or otherwise. But certainly one of the most telling attributes of art is the way it works as a feeling whole. With prose fiction, as with painting or sculpture, the anecdote may leave our memories while a tone remains, and when we have forgotten how a novel ends, we may well remember how it feels. The literary work is itself an internal organization of impulse; the text itself is a structure of emotion. To take such a view is to regard a novel apart from its status as a narrative structure, its array of incidents, and apart, too, from its status as a thematic structure, its play of ideas. One may consider a work's expressive structure as its technique for organizing certain permanent issues of emotional experience: such as the relations of power and victimage, desire and restraint, guilt and innocence, not in so far as these are explicitly addressed but in so far as they are implicitly expressed. To investigate this structure is to approach the work as an affective whole, a global configuration of forces, tensions, evasions, suppressions, displacements, and compromises. In one sense, this is simply to take very seriously the notion of artistic unity. Instead of rigid distinctions between form and content, which oblige us to locate psychological interest only on the side of the latter, we can recognize that formal elements enter into the organization of feeling. A shift in point of view, a particular use of irony, a variation in prose style, become ways of qualifying the emerging fictional structure which is an emotional structure as much as it is a structure of events, a structure of images, a structure in words. Such considerations, of course, do not apply to Victorian fiction alone. But they become especially pertinent in the discussion of a period in which scientists could disclose emotional extremes but could achieve no consensus on how to explain them, and in which fiction had as strong a claim as psychology to find order in the life of the passions.

How do these novels give structure to emotion? That is one way of putting the question. A second is, how do they represent the mind? Victorian theories of personality are most often treated like the sexual theories of children, as quaint or fantastic, charming perhaps but nugatory. We tend to see them not so much as explanations of the pathological as further symptoms; what the Victorians offer as reasons, we receive as rationalizations; and although we may acknowl-

edge a rich vein of repressed desire in the great Victorian fictions, we prefer to do the excavating ourselves. The claim in this study, however, is that Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot ought to be exempt from such hasty dismissal, that their conceptions of character are mature and compelling not because they made contributions to a scientific understanding, but because they did something more notable and more fundamental. They identified the experience that any science must explain. As it happened, all three figures had an amateur interest in contemporary psychology: Brontë in phrenology and physiognomy, Dickens in mesmerism, and George Eliot in physiological psychology. But they did not defer to the prestige of science or to the pretensions of pseudo-science. Scientific ideas were quarried for literary conceits, and psychological theories engendered figures for the psyche. Brontë, Dickens, and George Eliot performed the act of imagination that precedes all psychology; they *envisioned* the mind and the vagaries of mental life.

Structures of emotion and figures of mind – these are the issues which together begin to compose that representation of personality which it is our task to study. But “representation” and “personality” have their own sinuous histories. No sooner do we name our subject than we find that it begins to move. From the earliest work of Charlotte Brontë to the mature work of George Eliot stretches nearly half a century, and the distance in time is as nothing compared to the distance in fictional method. Who could be more dissimilar than Brontë and George Eliot? Only, perhaps, Brontë and Dickens. But this perception must not mislead us. The Victorian period has only a superficial chaos, as it has only a superficial unity. One of its peculiarities is that so many of its leading writers – not only Brontë, Dickens, and George Eliot, but Ruskin, Mill, Carlyle, Tennyson, Arnold – seem to reflect the age but not to reflect one another. They all seem quintessentially Victorian and fundamentally different. So it is with the representation of personality in the work of Brontë, Dickens, and George Eliot. Our task is not to explain away the differences; it is not to show that the obvious incompatibilities are in fact identities. It is to find a method and an idiom that will allow us to establish commerce between distant points.

Any just presentation of the Victorian age must find a *modus vivendi* with those venerable grandparents in the house of criticism, romance, and realism. Admittedly, they are clumsy terms, which often provide only the illusion of understanding. It would be tempting to discard

them altogether. But where would one be then? Two terms poorer, no distinctions richer. Romance and realism capture an intuitive distinction; if they yield no precise definitions, they at least indicate how the Victorians defined themselves. Brontë, Dickens, and George Eliot, all saw themselves as realists, though their "realisms" display little in common. All three opposed their work to a tradition of romance which, it is clear, left traces on their fiction. Our own method will be to take these terms as preliminary not final, not to dismiss them, but to use them with circumspection.

This book is not a history, but it aspires to historical pertinence. We cannot trace the representation of personality through its every transformation, nor can we offer a comprehensive theory. But we can hope to give a perspicuous analysis of the texts on which a history and a theory would be based. It is a more modest goal. But anyone who deals in such rich particulars as these Victorian novels can forsake for a time the pleasures of generalization. The imaginative endeavor to find a structure for the emotions and a figure for the mind had particular texts as its arena, and although it had its own tangled history which will be considered in its place, our first concern must be with the fictions themselves. So – to the particulars.

Notes

Introduction

1 Eliot, George, "Notes on form in art," in Pinney, Thomas (ed.) (1963) *Essays of George Eliot*, New York, Columbia University Press, 434. This edition of George Eliot's essays will be used throughout since it contains work not included in the Cabinet edition.

2 Frye, Northrop (1957, 1971) *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 53, 52. Frye, of course, will proceed to say many important things about the place of emotion in literary experience.

Chapter 1 Brontë's romance

1 Technically, Angria is not the center for the stories until 1834, when Zamorna demands and is given the Angrian province in gratitude for his military heroism. The stories evolve from several loose groupings of tales, the "Young Men," "Our Fellows," and "Tales of the Islanders," into the "Glass Town Chronicles" and Verdopolitan tales

Conclusion

Apuleius relates that when Psyche disregards the commands of Cupid and looks at him while he sleeps, she pricks herself on one of his arrows and thereby falls "in love with Love." She kisses him with greater and greater fervor and then in the midst of her new passion, a drop of lamp oil falls upon Cupid, rousing him from his sleep. Deploring her disobedience, he departs "without utterance of any word from the kisses and hands of his most unhappy wife." Psyche, however, manages

to catch him as he was rising by the right thigh with both hands, and held him fast as he flew about in the air, hanging to him (poor wretch) through his cloudy journey, until such time that, constrained by weariness, she let go and fell down upon the ground.

Cupid descends to upbraid her and then takes flight through the air, only to suffer his own bitter sense of loss.¹

The incident makes a fit allegory for the more terrestrial domain that this study has traversed. For in line with a long exegetical tradition, we

might take Cupid's flight from Psyche as a parable of the fragile unity of personality, whose diverse elements attract only to repel; now desire woos the moral faculty, now it flees, now the mind seeks its body, now it suffers in isolation. Passion and reason, desire and duty, love and obligation, body and mind, have not appeared in these pages as complementary aspects of the personality suitably conjoined within a psychological whole, but as rival imperatives inciting elaborate imaginative response. Our starting point was George Eliot's definition of fiction, "an arrangement of events and feigned correspondences according to predominant feeling," but it became quickly evident that the terms of this definition were no more stable than their relations. Feeling is no aesthetic potentate, presiding over the development of narrative, it endures its own inflections, suffers its own refinement, makes its concessions to mind, and struggles to find a pattern of events adequate to its complex demands.

The movement of Victorian fiction has most often been taken as an aspiration towards realism, and as long as the familiar qualifications are offered and the usual provisos attached, there can be no quarrel with the general assessment. But the present study has assumed that the mimetic and expressive ambitions of Victorian fiction cannot be separated, that the refinements of realism were at the same time refinements of expression, and that the turn to moral law, to social institutions, and to science, was not a turning away from personality but a turning loose of personality, a release of the affections into a wider domain. To extend the range of feeling, to give form to the emotions, to express the peculiar tessellations of affective experience – these activities were as urgent in Victorian fiction as the striving for a more faithful rendering of social life. And no more than Victorian society was the Victorian psyche an homogeneous or unified whole.

The energy of nineteenth-century psychology, together with its instability, provided a stimulus to the imagination but a burden for the moral sense. In the twentieth century, pictures of the mind have been given sharp outlines; although contemporary psychology can claim to understand more, it certainly imagines less. Victorian psychology, on the other hand, sometimes seemed to have as many theories as facts, with the result that it was often unclear where observation ended and imagination began. The phrenological skull, the mesmeric fluid, the mechanical equivalent of consciousness – these were images powerful enough to fascinate but too weak to sustain a working science. The

result was a poverty of theoretical consensus amidst a wealth of striking detail. The literary imagination was not constrained by a narrow doctrine, but neither was it reassured by a coherent one. This circumstance was an invitation to great imaginative license in the effort to represent personality, and Brontë, Dickens, and George Eliot all pressed boldly towards extremes and then confronted the painful moral task of accommodating themselves to what they found.

The fact that the self is not one thing but many things: no perception could be more fundamental, and yet, felt deeply enough, no perception is more disturbing. We are not only innocent, but also guilty; not only strong but weak; not only mutually entwined but irrevocably sundered; we are not only minds, but bodies; not only wholes but fragments; not only energy but form. The simple recognition that the self is myriad became urgent in these novelists, who saw so clearly the diversity of emotional life, even as they retained powerful longings for its unity. The perfect love in Brontë, the happy family in Dickens, the moral ideal in George Eliot, these represent the syntheses towards which three vigorous imaginations tend, but they are vigorous in large part because they concede the difficulty, even the impossibility, of achieving the syntheses which they pursue. The acknowledgment of division and the longing for unity create that distinctive pattern that we have traced: powerful wishes, corrected by clear-sighted perceptions, which themselves incite new wishes. The complex designs elaborated in these novels – Jane Eyre at her prospect, Esther Summerson among her avatars, Dorothea Brooke as fluidity in structure – are deeply ambiguous gestures which cannot be sorted according to the canons of realism or romance. They represent resolute efforts to negotiate between the crippling oppositions of the divided personality, but they do not resolve the oppositions so much as they raise them to a higher imaginative plane where loss and gain cannot be readily distinguished.

In taking the fiction of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot as my subject, I have confronted a diversity as provoking as any they faced. The novel, like the self, is not one thing but many things, and in its own way the aesthetic perception is as unsettling as the psychological. I, too, have longed for a consoling synthesis and have had my wishes corrected by my perceptions. These authors cannot be assimilated to one line of development; it is essential to respect their

difference; and I have hoped to turn their diversity to advantage. In our own age of bifurcated sensibilities, we are often told that we must choose between competing temperaments, between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Picasso and Matisse, Joyce and Lawrence; but I have assumed that in spite of the marked dissimilarities among Brontë, Dickens, and George Eliot, it is possible not to choose, indeed that it is important not to choose. Their divergence has reminded us, sometimes roughly, that the representation of personality assumes many forms, and in so doing, it has forced us to respect the amplitude of their age and their genre.

Yet it would be disingenuous to insist that these figures concern me only insofar as they suggest distinctions or oppositions. This study has necessarily proceeded by examining the distinct elements of literary expression, the forms of plot, the patterns of imagery, and the principles of characterization which constitute the fictional representation of personality. Still, there is the personality which a novel represents and the personality which it exemplifies. Only the first is susceptible to sober critical assessment. The second involves the least communicable aspect of literary experience, the work as an expressive totality which acts upon the reader with all its elements at once and creates a rhythm for the emotions. It is on this elusive plane of literary experience that our three authors have their most fundamental connections. The substance of their fiction is highly individual, even idiosyncratic, but the imaginative activity which works upon that substance – widening, integrating, organizing, disentangling, analogizing – reveals a consanguinity in patterns of feeling and methods of expression. From the extravagant desires of Angrian romance to the complex mental transactions of *Middlemarch* stretches a long poorly-lit corridor in the house of fiction. But it is a corridor, not a chasm. The passions achieve a form in Angria, and the structures of *Middlemarch* create their own source of expression. These stations of the imagination, like other stations we have reached, are distant but not incommensurable. The specificity and materiality of fiction matter greatly to a reader, but so do the broadest, least specific, patterns that inhere within a work. Whether it is pictured as a river or a vista, whether it is named passion or ardor, whether it appears in many characters or in many parts of one character, the life of the emotions must be given form as well as substance; it must have its concrete terms placed in abstract configuration; and it is on this plane, too abstract to characterize but sufficiently

concrete to experience, that Brontë, Dickens, and George Eliot move so often in harmony.

Finally, however, it is neither the bracing dissonance nor the subtle harmony that one most values in these authors; it is the purity of tone in three singular imaginations. Few of us emit such pure tones, but in listening to theirs we may be aroused to undertake that representation of personality that occurs in life as well as art. Their fiction provides a training for the sensibility; it disciplines the emotions; it renews the moral sense. But here criticism passes into panegyric. I end by enjoining my reader to close my book and to open Brontë, then Dickens, then George Eliot. There comes a moment in studying literary expression when one can no longer describe or analyze, when one can no longer interpret, when one can only gesture mutely in the hope that others will share one's perception and one's enthusiasm. It is time for me to make that mute gesture.

32 Allen, Walter (1964) *George Eliot*, Louis Kronenberger (ed.) Masters of World Literature Series, New York, Macmillan, 185.

Chapter 8 The cygnet in the pond, the current in the mind

1 Eliot, George, "The natural history of German life," in Pinney, Thomas (ed.) (1963) *Essays of George Eliot*, New York, Columbia University Press, 270.

2 Eliot, George, "The natural history of German life," 271; Letter to John Blackwood, 9 July 1860, in Haight, Gordon S. (ed.) (1954-78) *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols, New Haven, Yale University Press, III, 318; Letter to Charles Bray, 5 July 1859, *Letters*, III, 111.

3 George Eliot, "Notes on form in art," *Essays*, 433.

4 Miller, J. Hillis (1975) "Optic and semiotic in *Middlemarch*," in Buckley, Jerome (ed.) *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, Harvard English Studies, VI, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 138.

5 Eliot, T. S. (1943, 1957) "The three voices of poetry," in *On Poetry and Poets*, New York, Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 101-2.

6 Eliot, George, Letter to Charles Bray, 5 July 1859, *Letters*, III, 111.

7 Schorer, Mark (1968) "Fiction and the 'Analogical Matrix,'" in *The World We Imagine*, New York, Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 36.

8 Schorer, "'Analogical Matrix,'" 41.

9 Eliot, George, "Notes on form in art," *Essays*, 433.

10 Eliot, George, "A fine excess - feeling is energy," in Pinney, Thomas (ed.) "Leaves from a notebook," in *Essays*, 451.

11 Marianna Torgovnick also discusses the phrase "home epic." See Torgovnick, Marianna (1981) *Closure in the Novel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

12 See Knoepfelmacher, U. C. (1965, 1970) *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 76.

Conclusion

1 Apuleius, *The Golden Ass: Being the Metamorphoses of Lucius Apuleius*, trans. W. Adlington, revised S. Gaselee (1915, 1958), T. E. Page, E. Capps, L. A. Post, W. H. D. Rouse, E. H. Warmington (eds), The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 233, 235.