

CHANGING PERSONS

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In *The Savage Mind* (1962), Claude Levi-Strauss defined the operation of theory as a form of *dissolution*, reducing or returning settled cultural concepts to their material or mental ingredients: 'I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man.'¹ Four years later, Michel Foucault, looking back at the storm of disagreement this pronouncement had raised in the French academy, agreed with his famous colleague as to the nature and necessity of this 'unmaking', but urged him to re-admit history into its scope. In a signal acknowledgment, Foucault reminded his readers of the Nietzschean question, *who speaks?*, and accepting the linguistic model as the formal means by which the problem could be formulated, wrote, in the eloquent last section of *The Order of Things*, that

Man had been a figure occurring between two modes of language: or rather, he was constituted only when language, having been situated *within representation* and, as it were, *dissolved* in it, freed itself from that situation at the cost of its own fragmentation: man composed his own figure in the interstices of that fragmented language... As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.²

When that end came, owing to a change in 'the fundamental arrangements of knowledge', Foucault was prepared to wager that 'man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.'

The metaphysical confidence of this wager incorporated its own burden of scientific absolutism and arrogance. Nevertheless, one could argue that the succeeding thirty years or so did indeed witness the enforced dissolution of the human subject at the heart of the 'humanities' experiment, subjecting it, successively or together, to the disabling gaze of structuralist and semiotic analysis, feminist critique, ideological attack, deconstructive strategy, postmodern play, Lacanian psychoanalysis, textual destabilisation, new technologies of reading and new ways of 'doing' history and philosophy. For literature departments, I would suggest, the crucial question foregrounded or, indeed, pushed to the frontline in this war of theory was representation. Never since Plato had so much stress been placed on this notion: never had it carried such a burden of difference, causing Jacques Derrida to say that if this word, *representation*, died out from our natural languages, future generations would find it impossible to determine its meaning.³

For students of textual culture, overwhelmed by the enormous proliferation of representational practices, products and ideologies that constitute our social existence and circulate within it, in Stephen Greenblatt's memorable phrase, as 'mimetic capital', a theory of representation needed to answer the following questions: the question of presence, the question of signification, and the question of authority. The first of these

sets a philosophical problem, the second a semiotic one, and the third a problem of politics. What, if anything, is present, or for that matter re—presented, in literary texts? How is meaning constituted and conveyed? And for whom does the representation stand; that is, whom is it empowered to represent? Behind all these questions floats the ghostly presence-in-absence of the dissolved, and indeed discredited human subject whose past replies can no longer be heard, and which would scarcely be intelligible if they were.

Just how distant this ghostly subject has become may be seen from a passage in Jean Paul Sartre's classic text *What is Literature?* where a liberal Kantian philosophy of writing makes it an act of human responsibility:

The writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal men to other men so that they may assume full responsibility before the object which has been made bare. It is assumed that no one is ignorant of the law because there is a code and the law is written down; therefore, you are free to violate it, but you know the risks you run. Similarly, the function of the writer is to act in such a way that no one can be ignorant of the world and that nobody can say that he's innocent of what it's all about. And since he has once committed himself in the universe of language, he can never again pretend that he cannot speak.⁴

Each person confronts the world and other human beings through the text, as moral beings capable of choice, intention and responsibility. The text renders us subjects in a gesture of reciprocity: as 'an act of confidence in the freedom of men', it grants us power and agency, offering us a means of escape from the humanist dilemma of being-for-oneself and being-for-others. Attractive as this argument may have seemed (rather briefly, as it turned out) in the political climate in which it was first advanced, it could scarcely be used today to justify a unitary subject position from which the author and the reader enter into their textual contract. Most contemporary theorists would be suspicious of any invocation of the category of the subject as if it were epistemologically fundamental. Subjects, they would argue, are constituted in and by texts, but they are not independent sources of what the text reflects. And indeed the a-centred surfaces of post-humanist texts do not even pretend to reflect unitary subjects, shifting, rather, between a multiplicity of author-positions and reader-perspectives. The same might be true of post-humanist cinema, releasing us from the tyranny of the *gaze* to the inconstant and morally ambiguous proliferation of *looks*. And certainly it is one element in the enterprise, argued for with astonishing ideological fervour, of hypertext, denuded of single authorship, linear progression, control over readerly or spectatorial choice, or predetermined matrices of meaning.

I have no wish to trace this rather tired debate much further; we are all familiar with the troubled history of representation, and it would be superfluous to enter into a consideration of post-modern aesthetics in order to prove an anti-essentialist point. But there is another point to be made. The disappearance of a 'given' human subjectivity, the doubt as to whether textual presences are real presences, the instability and incoherence of textual effects, did not in fact inhibit several decades of intense scrutiny directed at

notions of the self, personhood and identity: not in philosophy alone, but in literary practice and theory. And one might argue, in fact — now that the smoke accompanying the fires set by the theory-arsonists has more or less dispersed — that this enquiry continues to present us with urgent and pressing problems. For even if the self is an illusion, personhood a philosophically incoherent idea and identity a mirage, these are beliefs which social belief and literary texts have energetically engaged: they need to be examined as part of that historical structure of representations which has made us what we are today. History, philosophy, literature return over and over again to the sources of the self, the construction of identities, the experiences of the body, sexuality, pleasure, solitude, memory and consciousness. I would argue that much of the continuing fascination of these subjects is because they are perceived, not as given historical products for cultural analysis, but as still determinable, open in a material sense to time and circumstance.

In the preface to his late and incomplete novel *Jogajog* (1929), which I have translated as *Relationships*, Rabindranath Tagore attempted to distinguish, in a way that might seem eccentric to European discourses of the self, between subjects and persons. He used the term which I translate as *subject* ('bishay') in the sense of 'subject-matter', matter for exposition, which he saw as distinct from *persons* (if that translation of his word 'bykti' is correct), defining the latter as an *expressive designation*, if such a phrase may be allowed. This is the passage:

Proper names are a form of address; subject names indicate nature. When we consider human beings not as persons but as subjects, we title them according to their qualities or states — thus one is called 'Barabou' (*Elder wife*), another 'Mastermashay' (*Respected teacher*).

When the time comes for literary name-giving we fall into uncertainty. The first question is this: is the nature of literary composition to do with subjects or persons? In science the thing itself is all, the only criterion is a qualitative one. When we see a work of psychology entitled 'A Husband's Jealousy Concerning his Wife' we understand that the title will be justified only through analysis of this subject. But if 'Othello', the play, bore such a title, it would not have pleased us. For in this case it is not the subject, but the play that is important. That is to say, a totality made up of the plot, the style, the portrayal of characters, the language, the metre, the significance, the dramatic quality. This is what we might call the form of a person [personhood]. From the subject we gain information; from the person we gain the pleasure of self-expression. We bind the subject to our minds, adjectivally; we remember the person through her or his name, by addressing him or her.⁵

The purpose of this entire excursus on names, whether belonging to subjects or to persons, is to justify Rabindranath's re-naming of his own work, though in fact the name he chose for it is not a particularly good illustration of his thesis. But what he says has its own interest. The individual Rabindranath identifies as the subject of address through the

use of a proper name is, rather oddly, not the fictional person, but the fictional representation as a whole, the text. It is this text that has the form of a person, and speaks to us, making expressive (*bykta*) what the artist has designed. Persons therefore are possessed not only of a certain self or identity; they are identifiable, or interpellated, in a social sense. We can, he says, address them. It does not seem to matter to him that the person thus addressed may be a text, a fictional projection of identity, which is not so much a matter of *linear* persistence in time as *composite*, made up of the juxtaposition of different elements. Relatedness is important, but it is not something that the text can assume as a psychological or physiological given, since textual persons clearly do not exist in real time.

Yet European notions of personhood have usually been founded on the sense of continuity or relatedness. Richard Wollheim begins his book, *The Thread of Life*, by quoting Kierkegaard:

It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting-place from which to understand it — backwards.⁶

The problem of understanding a life in time is one that occupies Wollheim too, in a study centrally concerned with the nature of persons and of personhood. For it seems clear to him that persons are beings conscious of leading their lives in time, beings whose identities are both subjective and relational — capable, that is, of reflecting upon themselves and the continuity of their physical and psychological experience. This continuity, this sense of an identity conferred upon events, upon the life that is led, is what Wollheim terms the *thread of life*. In his cultured, humane, philosophically post-Freudian study, he follows this thread, like Theseus in the labyrinth, as far as it will take him, even to the recesses of madness and death. But one classical premise of personhood that he will not abandon is that there is a thread: that persons are, in one sense or another, continuous with themselves, and therefore identities.

The narrative representation of persons in European literature has historically been dependent on types of unity-relation established through moral and physical continuities, continuities of experience. But this notion begs several questions, one of the most pertinent of which has to do with the boundary of the self and its event-history. One speaks of persons, and one speaks of them leading lives in time, but is the life led in time — i.e. a *relation* (in two senses) of events — itself the person, or is there a person distinct from the life that is led? Western metaphysics (*contra* physicalist interpretations of consciousness from Locke to Dennett) encourages us to prefer the latter possibility, and this is essentialism of a kind, one signally assisted by the triumph of Cartesian philosophy in the seventeenth century. Personhood in the European novel from Richardson to Kafka is located in the indivisibility of the single consciousness, a consciousness attached to a body, which acts and suffers, but exceeding that body in its reach and curiosity. In

European representations of the self, moreover, identity is doubly constituted: as a sign, a means of being known to others, or *identified* — and as consistency, as being *identical* with oneself and one's event-history. Historically, this double implication of identity is crucial to the political, economic and moral arguments of Western culture, arguments premised on such terms as *freedom*, *knowledge*, and *responsibility*. It is as an identifiable human being who recollects and is conscious of her (more usually his) past actions that an individual can be held to be free and responsible. And as we all know, certain classes of subjects, who are held to be incapable of knowledge or consistency, will historically be denied personhood or full identity (such as slaves, children, women, coloured people, Jews, Palestinians, members of Islamic nations, and colonized races).

It is important at this moment of our history to think back critically upon this notion of personhood and its employment as an ideological tool in the thought and in the social and political practices of the West. None of us can be unconscious of the assaults that have recently been waged by the governments of two powerful Western nations upon substantially disarmed and technologically ill-equipped countries in the name of freedom, shared knowledge, and responsible action. This may seem to have little to do with the concept of a person, but in fact the assumption of a political and/ or moral prerogative, in its most repellent and frightening form, is almost wholly tied to the notion of a self who speaks, and the way in which that self is constituted. It would have been interesting to explore this act of self-construction further, especially because, as any critical examination will show it is founded as much upon evasion and inconsistency as upon unity and presence. Unfortunately, this is no part of my stated subject-matter today, and we can therefore take no more from this brief preliminary excursus on the nature of personhood than a sceptical, even tentative approach to the narrative resources employed to represent a self in time. This scepticism might be reinforced by the Kierkegaardian insight which Wollheim fails sufficiently to recognise. Life can never really be understood in time because at no particular moment can we find 'the necessary resting-place from which to understand it — backwards.'

For Wollheim, personhood is premised on the ability of human individuals to recall the past through memory and order the future through hope. A test case that he employs is — characteristically, given his humanist leanings — the instance of an Ovidian metamorphosis. He argues that if the metamorphosis is a genuine one, as in the cases of Cadmus or Arachne, who are not recorded as retaining memory of their past existences subsequent to their transformation (that is, Cadmus becomes a typical snake, Arachne a typical spider), personhood is lost. On the other hand, where it seems that the metamorphosed character continues as a 'person' burdened with human memory (as in the case of Io, turned into a heifer, who scratches her name on the ground with her hoof) there is in fact no transformation. Io is a person, though only just: she is a human in the disguise of an animal. It is on the basis of this presupposition of personal identity as continuity that Wollheim, a philosophical psychologist, goes on to speak of elements that form the lives of persons: iconicity, imagination, desire, event-memory, introjection. To lead the life of a person is, at least partly, to reflect upon it and know that it is being led.

Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* was published the same year as Wollheim's study: one reason why neither work mentions the other, but philosophically too the two are at odds. The only feature they have in common is that both refer to Bernard Williams's thought-experiments involving persons named A and B, one of whom is to be tortured and the other rewarded after being infused with the other's memories and beliefs through an operation: the question, obviously, is *what should A (or B) ask for?* Instead of using examples from Greek mythology to develop arguments in response to this question, Parfit offers the case of the Teletransporter, a science-fiction device, through which individuals are destroyed and replicated, or simply replicated, or simply destroyed, with or without their brains and memories: thus teasing out the notion of identity by separating it from personality. Parfit's conclusions about personhood are deeply anti-humanist and reductionist: he asserts that identity is not important, that we may be content with successive selves, that psychological continuity does not necessarily presuppose personal identity, that there is no self (no Cartesian ego) beyond what we are physically and that, in sum, we are not what we believe. I find these arguments persuasive and attractive.

But the literary representation of persons rarely fits either Wollheim's or Parfit's criteria, though it must be conceded that *their* philosophical persons are also fictional texts. It seems to me that literature is interested in personhood in crisis. In certain kinds of pre-modern narrative — Homeric epic or allegorical romance, for example — persons are weakly represented in terms of their psychological awareness of selfhood and held together more by the physical continuity of their experience; in the dominant modern form of narrative representation, the novel, personhood tends to be located in psychological subjectivity in the capacity of mental life to penetrate and appropriate even the most chaotic and directionless record of physical experience (as in, say, *Tristram Shandy*). The most interesting question here relates to how far personhood is coterminous with the physical boundary of the self, and how that boundary is conceived. Is the person Achilles exactly and no more than the human body of Achilles, or is he also that body gripped, as Athena grips it, by the hair, to hold him back from killing Agamemnon with his spear at the start of the *Iliad*? Is Tristram Shandy only the human child and later adult Tristram, or is he rather a Cartesian Cogito diffused through the entire pre-history of his birth, from the moment of his conception, near the start of the novel, when his father forgot to wind up the clock? Are persons narratively constituted, as facts of discourse, and in that case are they stories about other people as well as about themselves? This would seem to be the implication of Tagore's description of personality. Does it make sense to speak of psychological subjects in fiction, constituted of memory and desire, when the unity of these subjects is merely an illusion projected by our desire on shreds of words and images? To take the instances of Proust and Woolf, each of these writers is a non-linear specialist in disconnectedness; yet in so far as persons are made in and by representation, Mrs Ramsay may have dropped a stitch, but she can never lose the thread. The stocking that she knits, like Penelope's web, will never really be too short.

I would suggest that personhood, so far from being a psychological given, which literature reflects, is constantly invented and put to the test in literary representation. The act of reading fills us with discomfort because we know ourselves to be both inadequately connected and over-connected by comparison with our textual exemplars. Literary

persons are more like persons than we are, but they are also, fatally, at the brink of losing their selfhood, of degenerating into textual effect, dogma, allegory, myth. I will look at three examples.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, we read of the mourning Niobe, who is punished for her pride in her children, seven sons and seven daughters, by losing them one by one to Apollo's arrows. As, she weeps, her heart turns to stone, and she is transformed into a stone fountain:

Niobe gazed at the corpses
All her children were dead.
Her husband was dead.
Her face hardened
And whitened, as the blood left it.
Her very hair hardened
Like hair carved by a chisel.
Her open eyes became stones.
Her whole body
A stone.
Life drained from every part of it.
Her tongue
Solidified in her stone mouth.
Her feet could not move, her hands
Could not move: they were stone,
Her veins were stone veins.
Her bowels, her womb, all stone
Packed in stone. ·
And yet
This stone woman wept.⁷

Ovid exploits the representational analogy brilliantly while positioning his scene at the very edge of the liveable, as we might describe it: *nihil est in imagine vivum*, he writes, 'there is nothing alive in the picture'. Niobe's grief tips her over the brink of personhood into the stoniness of nature or art; but, at the same time, she becomes more, not less of a person when she is a fountain, because she becomes so representationally adequate to her lived experience, her 'subjectivity'.

In *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Freud characterised melancholia as a failure to complete the work of mourning: 'in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego itself.' This condition of emptiness, of *hollowing out*, as we might call it, may be transferred by the mourner to the world she inhabits in a radical and absolute sense. The resources of the self are then doubly under stress: as unsupported by any external human contact, or friendship; and as drawing every experience into the abyss of its own self-hatred and sense of waste. A fictive rendering of this state, possibly not unconnected with the author's own experience of grieving, may be seen in Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826).

Written after the deaths of Percy Shelley in 1822 and Byron in 1824, as well as the earlier losses of two of her three surviving children, *The Last Man* is an anti-Malthusian, Godwinian fable showing how easily mankind may be doomed to extinction if the ‘race of mothers’ is lost to disease. The novel is permeated by the author’s own ‘chaos of melancholy in which I lived so long’, as she describes it in letters written to Jane Williams during this period. This is ‘a melancholy and misery no human words can describe and no human mind long support.’⁸ Mary Shelley’s own experience leads her to identify herself with the last man of her title, the solitary human being left on earth after his companions have been wiped out by a global epidemic of plague. In a *Journal* entry of May 14, 1824, she speaks of her sympathy with her hero’s feelings, ‘feeling myself the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me.’⁹

The year set in *The Last Man* for the end of the human race is 2100; the novel itself was written in the aftermath of a cholera epidemic commencing in Calcutta in 1817 and threatening Europe in the 1820s. Its dystopic mood offers a feminine corrective to male political fictions of progress and perfectibility; in this respect it answers Godwin’s dream of a revolutionary re-pristination of society with a vision of irresistible disaster. The novel has been read as a political allegory of sorts, but such readings, working out the somewhat tedious and over-extended plot, are overshadowed by the total impact of its apocalyptic rhetoric:

On the twenty-first of June, it was said that an hour before noon, a black sun arose: an orb, the size of that luminary, but dark, defined, whose beams were shadows, ascended from the west; in about an hour it reached the meridian, and eclipsed the bright parent of day. Night fell upon every country, night, sudden, rayless, entire.¹⁰

This is the black sun, we might say, of Kristeva’s study of depression and melancholia that bears the same title. ‘Where does this black sun come from?’ Kristeva asks, ‘Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me?... For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia. I am trying to address an abyss of sorrow a noncommunicable grief.’¹¹ The hero of Mary Shelley’s novel, Lionel Verney, calls, at the very end of his tale, upon his own Muse, a ‘sad-visaged power’ named Melancholy, to quit her Cimmerian solitude and spread her ‘murky fogs’ over the earth as he chronicles the last days of the human race.

The Last Man does not present us with any very striking representation of human persons. In many ways it is an unsatisfactory novel, tediously elaborating the lives of psychologically unprepossessing figures caught up in sensational events. Its characters are prone to hysteria and self-pity. What seems to me to be remarkable about the book is its obsessive concern with humanity itself under the sign of extinction, a shadow that threatens to cancel out all pretence of unitary and coherent selfhood. If a novel as a whole can be a person, or the representation of a person, *The Last Man* offers us a threatened

personhood, alternately self-absorbed and self-hating. It is in the accents of this figure, uncertain of its generic constitution as of its philosophical sanctions, that the novel speaks to us of an anxiety not redressible within its fictional frame.

What would it be to live beyond the extinction of the human race? Margaret Atwood's most recent novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) examines that possibility in the light of what we might call bioscience fiction. Humanity has, in her fable, been wiped out much as Mary Shelley had imagined it to be, though by a manmade disaster, an AIDS-like epidemic deliberately spread by the circulation of a Viagra-like drug promising instant sexual pleasure. The scientist responsible for this global pandemic is himself dead; his friend Jimmy, the only survivor (though not quite alone, as the last pages of the novel suggest) has been left to care for a new and genetically improved race of neo-humans called Crakers. The novel is a record of Jimmy's experience, and in so far as that experience is connected and relatable, compounded of memory and reflection (though not of much hope), Jimmy is a narrative person, i.e. a *persona*. Indeed, following Ursula Le Guin's wise prescription in her essay 'Science Fiction and Mrs Brown'¹², Jimmy is recognizably possessed of a distinct human personality: he is cranky, worried, incompetent, despairing, anxious, a figure who calls for readerly identification and sympathy.

In the essay I have spoken of, Ursula Le Guin, arguably the finest of modern science fiction writers, confronts the problem of personhood in an imagined universe (possibly the Parfitian universe of Teletransporters) where the contours of known identity-formations are imperilled. She cites Virginia Woolf's dismissive comment 'There are no Mrs Browns in Utopia' (a reference to the fables of her contemporary H. G. Wells) and supports the Woolfian vision of Mrs Brown, unmistakably a 'person' whom Woolf met in a railway carriage as she was travelling from Richmond to Victoria, and described in her celebrated essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'. Accepting the justice of Woolf's suspicion of the post-humanist parable as inimical to personhood, Le Guin nevertheless argues the case for Mrs Brown as a survivor figure, a person domiciled both in utopias and in dystopias. After all, Mrs Brown is an effect of prose, a reflection of what we feel ourselves to be. We can create her anywhere, house her in a variety of possible worlds. And, so Le Guin argues, the survival of fiction depends on the survival of Mrs Brown: without her, neither science nor fiction would be worth having.

Le Guin's view is that of an old-fashioned humanist, though she is herself the author of several post-humanist visions of possibilities beyond the person. Such possibilities haunt contemporary fiction, afflicted as it is by the climate of larger debates surrounding the nature of consciousness and its representation. In one sense the art of European postmodernism has travelled beyond the sense of a single unifying consciousness as the 'dominant' (to use Jurij Tynyanov's term) in fictional representation: 'the notion of an infinitely gentle/ infinitely suffering thing.' Science fiction is one kind of writing that gestures us towards the possibilities of living without relatedness, identity, or uniqueness, though it is by no means the only one. I would suggest, in fact, that literature always, in one way or another, simultaneously threatens and supports the notion of personhood. It constructs the person as a fiction, but motions

us towards a sense of how contingent, how dependent on saving illusions, such fictions are. In so doing, it tells us that we are all, at every moment of our lives, the last of our tribe: on the brink of dissolution as we struggle to read ourselves in narrative *personae*.

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