“The Characters Speak Because They Want to Speak:” The Autonomy of the Imaginal Other
Chapter 7 of:

INVISIBLE GUESTS
The Development of Imaginal Dialogues

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SPRING PUBLICATIONS
WOODSTOCK, CONNECTICUT
2000

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CHAPTER SEVEN

"The Characters Speak Because They Want to Speak:"
The Autonomy of the Imaginal Other

One cannot “make” characters, only marionettes.
—Elizabeth Bowen, 1975

...the characters speak because they want
To speak, the fat, the roseate characters,
Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry,
Complete in a completed scene, speaking
Their parts as in a youthful happiness.
—Wallace Stevens, from “Credences of Summer”

In a secular world, whose boundaries and dimensions are drawn by those who accept the structures of science as God-given rules, the concept of projection has been used to locate in a shadowy interior of “mind” all those experiences which can find no place in the so-called “objective” order of things. And so, inevitably, for those who would make current science sacred, the imaginal other is believed to be an aspect of self or of the self’s experience which is projected outward and given a personified form. This may be so.

But just when we begin to treat all characters of the imagination as mere projections of self, a central paradox emerges. Although the other may bear some resemblance to myself or my experience, this is not always the case. I often do not plan his appearance. In the midst of my thinking, my activities, my speaking, I find he has appeared and spoken to me. In some cases, I cannot predict what he will say or
know when he will end. It is true that it is my awareness which occasions my noting of him but, apart from that, the imaginal other may have as much autonomy as the so-called real others I meet in consensual space. If one insists that, in theory, I created him, it can with equal force be maintained that, in experience, it seems as though he created me. “The songs made me, not I them,” said Goethe. Even if one accepts that I have created him, one must also acknowledge that this creation, like the procreation of a child, leads to my offspring’s existing independently of my conscious intention.

I say “often” and not “always” because one can consciously conjure up a character and deny her autonomy, carefully lending her only one’s own words and desired qualities. However when setting about this attempt to cabin, crib, and confine, one can often catch oneself suppressing actions, phrases, and characteristics that threaten to assert themselves outside one’s conscious intention. Elizabeth Bowen, speaking of the creation of a novel, said, “The term ‘creation of character’ (or characters) is misleading. Characters preexist, they are found” (1975, 172). A similar ambiguity concerning “invention” and “discovery” is found among mathematicians and philosophers of mathematics. Do mathematicians invent their remarkable structures or do they discover them? The paradox is compounded when one realizes that to invent originally meant “to find out,” “to discover.” The interpenetrating of fact and fiction suggested by their common linguistic root is surely at the heart of the philosophical ambiguity.

Among those who have most profoundly challenged the scientific and reductionistic attempt to denature and de-realize those objects of experience that do not fit neatly into the scientific construction of reality is the philosopher Ernst Cassirer. In his critical examination of those reductionistic conceptions of the structure and function of the mythic world, Cassirer argues against all attempts to “twist the world of objective change back into the subjective world and interpret it according to the categories of the subjective world.”

For man does not simply transfer his own finished personality to the god or simply lend him his own feeling and consciousness of himself: it is rather through the figure of his gods that man first finds this self-consciousness. (Cassirer, 1955, 155, 211)
THE AUTONOMY OF THE IMAGINAL OTHER

The articulation of the imaginal other is at the same time an articulation of the being and activity of the self. These articulations are not only aimed at establishing a rudimentary sense of self but are an ongoing and changing way of participating in the complex meanings and correlative definitions of self and world.

Cassirer emphasizes how in mythical consciousness, even if a tutelary spirit is closely associated with a person—perhaps even believed to inhabit his body or govern his being—this spirit is conceived of not

...as the man’s I, as the “subject” of his inner life, but as something objective, which dwells in man, which is spatially connected with him and hence can also be spatially separated from him... And even where the closest possible relation exists between the tutelary spirit and the man in whom it dwells...it nevertheless appears as something existing for itself, something separate and strange. (1955, 168)

For example, the Batak of Sumatra hold the belief that it is a spirit which determines the character and fortune of a person. The spirit is like a man within a man, but it “does not coincide with his personality and is often in conflict with his I; it is a special being within the man, having its own will and its own desires, which it is able to gratify against the man’s will and to the man’s discomfiture” (Warneck, 1909, 8).

Experiences of this sort are not confined to times past and cultures far away. We need only turn to novelists’ experiences with their characters. According to the novelist, painter, and aesthetician Joyce Cary, when Proust was writing Remembrance of Things Past, a woman, Mme. Schiff, wrote Proust to complain that his character Swann had become ridiculous. Proust, Cary says, responded that he (Proust) “had no wish to make Swann ridiculous, far from it. But when he had come to this part of the work, he had found it unavoidable.” In his

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18 Although painters often work from form and color as much as from imagined beings, these too are often experienced as presences which suggest themselves to the artist from outside. For instance, Miro said that “forms take reality for me as I work. In other words, rather than setting out to paint something, I begin painting and as I paint the picture begins to assert itself, or suggest something under my brush.” For Nolde, forms were vehicles for color, “Color in their own lives,” “weeping and laughing, dream and bliss, hot and sacred, like love songs and the erotic like songs and glorious chorale! Colors in vibration, pealing like silver bells and clanging like bronze bells, proclaiming happiness, passion, and love, soul, blood and death” (quoted in The Smithsonian, January, 1981).
jealousy, Swann acted in the "ridiculous way he did in spite of Proust's intention as author." Cary explains,

It is a form of intuition; it is the immediate recognition of a real truth, a penetration into the realities of character. And it has broken through Proust's first conception of Swann, and immediately deepened his awareness of Swann's possibilities. Swann, as a character created by Proust, here assumes an individual personality to be intuited by his own author. (1958, 87-88)

Cary presents another example of a character so autonomous that the intensity of his words and beliefs radically alters the author's intentions for him: Ivan in The Brothers Karamazov. Dostoevsky's famous "Pro and Contra" chapter, rather than asserting the inadequacies of atheism compared with orthodoxy, as Dostoevsky had originally intended, did just the reverse.

[When Dostoevsky] asked himself how would Ivan see reality, how would he argue about it, he realised with the force of intuition a truth that had been before only the statement of a hypothetical case, and then expressed it with the utmost power. So that his scheme for that chapter, his concept a priori of what that chapter would mean, was completely ruined. (Cary, 1958, 85)

Ivan's arguments arise independently of Dostoevsky's desire. Indeed, as Cary points out, Dostoevsky was "terrified:"

He feared the Government censors. He wrote to all his religious and orthodox friends to tell them that in the very next installment he would bring in his priest, the saintly Father Zossima, to answer Ivan. He spent weeks on those fifty pages which were to give the refutation. And, after all his work, he failed most dismally. (41)

This experience of autonomy appears to be true as well for characters based on real life people. Eugene O'Neill (1981) claimed he had never written about a character who was not an actual person. "But, " he was quick to add, "even these things have a way of developing!"

Marina Tsvetaeva, an early twentieth-century Russian poet, described how she was moved to write by the imaginal being "which wanted to exist through" her. The hand of an artist, she said, belongs
not to oneself but to that being. In a letter to Pasternak, Tsvetaeva said, “We dream and write not when we please but when it pleases” (quoted in Muchnic, 1980, 7). She would often experience herself writing against her own will, motivated instead by the beings that chose her to give them life.19 The poet Joseph Brodsky compared Tsvetaeva’s poetry to folklore, saying that she spoke not in a “heroine’s monologue” but in a “shepherd’s song,” in “speech intended for one’s self, for one’s own being,” when “the speaker is also his own hearer” and “the ear listens to the mouth” (quoted in Muchnic, 1980).

Certainly not all authors experience their characters forcing them to write against their will (what psychiatry calls a delusion of influence). Not even Tsvetaeva experienced that all the time. Nor do we experience imaginal others as always having this high degree of autonomy. What I am pointing to is a continuum ranging from the imaginal other’s having no thoughts, feelings, or actions which the conscious self does not lend it to the imaginal other’s acting, feeling and speaking in ways that surprise the self. Take for example the following experience of the novelist Francine du Plessis Gray (quoted in Christy, 1981).

I know the characters personally. They are sleeping in my bed with me. They wake me. They demand and insist on knowing what I am going to do with them next. I can let loose in my writing, make an alternate world that stands next to the real one. I can create the characters I would have liked to have been.

This example is intermediate in the sense that the characters are capable of initiating actions—they wake one, demand and insist—and yet the author is in charge of what happens to them next, who they are to become.

On either side of this example we can find Sartre and Mauriac engaged in a debate about the role of the author in modern literature. The debate concerns whether the author takes an omniscient role with respect to the characters, knowing all their actions, thoughts and feelings and delivering these to the reader. Sartre argues that Mauriac himself sat in the center of his heroine’s consciousness, helping her “lie to herself and, at the same time, judging and condemning her” (quoted in Harvey, 1965, 163). Mauriac, says Sartre,

19 Guy de Maupassant saw his double sitting at the other side of his writing desk and would hear his double dictating what he should write (Rogers, 1970).
wrote that the novelist is to his own creatures what God is to His. And that explains all the oddities of his technique. He takes God’s standpoint on his characters. God sees the inside and outside, the depths of body and soul, the whole universe at once. In like manner, M. Mauriac is omniscient about everything relating to his little world. What he says about his characters is Gospel... The time has come to say that the novelist is not God. (quoted in Harvey, 1965, 163)

Sartre asks Mauriac, “Do you want your characters to live?... See to it that they are free” (162).

He might also have asked this of George Sand, whose method of putting her words into the mouths of her characters contradicts her stated intention that they not be like dolls.

He obeys my every whim, my mood, my will...all his movements are the consequences of my own thoughts and my own words which I have put into his mouth...he is “me,” in short, a human being and not just a doll. (quoted in Rambert, 1949, 1)

Had she known Jean Paul Richter or Sartre, they probably would have fought. It was Richter who said,

A poet who must reflect whether he shall make a character say yes or no—to the devil with him; he is only a stupid corpse. (quoted in Darwin, 1871)

Sartre was intent on wanting “to drive providence from our works as we have driven it from our world.” In place of the god-like author, Sartre wished to

find an orchestration of consciousnesses which may permit us to render the multidimensionality of the event. Moreover, in giving up the fiction of the omniscient narrator, we have assumed the obligation of suppressing the intermediaries between the reader and the subjectivities. It is a matter of having him enter into their minds as into a windmill. (quoted in Harvey 1965, 162, 164)

Enid Blyton describes how, in the process of writing, her characters let her know what is going on, rather than the other way around.

I shut my eyes for a few moments, with my portable typewriter on my knee—I make my mind blank and wait—
and then, as clearly as I would see real children, my characters stand before me in my mind’s eye. I see them in detail—hair, eyes, feet, clothes, expression—and I always know their Christian names, but never their surnames... I don’t know what anyone is going to say or do. I don’t know what is going to happen. I am in the happy position of being able to write a story and read it for the first time, at one and the same moment... Sometimes a character makes a joke, a really funny one, that makes me laugh as I type it on my paper—and I think, “Well, I couldn’t have thought of that myself in a hundred years!” And then I think, “Well, who did think of it, then?” (quoted in Stoney, 1974)

We see development from one end toward the other of this continuum of dependence-autonomy in children’s early relations to their dolls. At first the imaginal other is an egocentric extension of one’s habitual stance. The other is not allowed an autonomy, often not even an attributed or projected interiority. The child puts the doll to bed and pretends to read it a story. The doll is not lent or allowed animation of its own but is rather the prop of the imaginer’s intention to be a caretaker. And this phenomenon is not restricted to children. The puppet-like status of the imaginal other may easily be found in imaginal transactions in adulthood as well. The imaginer may speak to an imaginal child but allow it no response. The feelings of the child may be assumed by the imaginer, but never is the child asked, nor are her spontaneous expressions noted (if even allowed for at all). The absence of autonomy can result in repetitive fantasies; only one point of view is being played out.

How different this is from experiences in which one does not know how the characters and their scenarios will unfold, in which the novel and the ego-alien appear and develop. Henry James, in his preface to *The Ambassadors*, described how the book arose from an anecdote told him at a garden party in Paris. The anecdote concerned an older man telling a younger one about his philosophy of life. This was to become the central scene of a book. “But what else?” James asked himself.

Where has he come from this older man and why has he come, what is he doing... To answer these questions plausibly, to answer them as under cross-examination in the witness box by counsel for the prosecution, in other words
to satisfactorily account for the character Strether and for his "peculiar tone" was to possess myself of the entire fabric. (1934, 313)

Now listen to James describing himself in relation to the development of this novel.

These things continued to fall together, as by the neat action of their own weight and form even while their commentator James himself scratched his head about them; he easily sees now that they were always well in advance of him. As the case completed itself he had in fact, from a good way behind, to catch up with them; breathless and a little flurried, as he best could. (1934, 315)

Similarly, Flannery O’Connor20 in her essay, “Writing Short Stories,” speaks of how she often did not know where she was going when she sat down to write a short story. She cites the experience of writing “Good Country People” as an example of how her writing was like discovery.

When I started writing that story, I didn’t know there was going to be a Ph.D. with a wooden leg in it. I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women I knew something about, and before I realized it, I had equipped one of them with a daughter with a wooden leg. As the story progressed, I brought in the Bible salesman, but I had no idea what I was going to do with him. I didn’t know he was going to steal that wooden leg until ten or twelve lines before he did it, but when I found out that this was what was going to happen, I realized that it was inevitable. (1961, 100)21

O’Connor says that nothing can be predicted about these mysterious moments in a story, for “they represent the working of grace for the characters” (116).

For Alice Walker the writing of the novel The Color Purple entailed a year of speaking with Celie and Shug and the other characters. She

20 For other such examples, see Cary (1958, 127-134) and Carver (1981, 18).
21 O’Connor continues: “As soon as the writer ‘learns to write,’ as soon as he knows what he is going to find, and discovers a way to say what he knew all along, or worse still, a way to say nothing, he is finished. If a writer is any good, what he makes will have its source in a realm much larger than that which his conscious mind can encompass and will always be a greater surprise to him than it can ever be to his reader” (1961, 83).
experienced them as “trying to contact” her, “to speak through her” (1983, 357). These presences did not ignore Walker’s day to day life. Indeed, they pressured her to move from the city to the country, expressed opinions about her work-life, and enjoyed a relation to her daughter. They offered other perspectives on situations than the ones Walker identified with.

Just as summer was ending, one or more of my characters—Celie, Shug, Albert, Sofia, or Harpo—would come for a visit. We would sit wherever I was, and talk. They were very obliging, engaging, and jolly. They were, of course, at the end of their story but were telling it to me from the beginning. Things that made me sad, often made them laugh. Oh, we got through that; don’t pull such a long face, they’d say. Or, you think Reagan’s bad, you ought’ve seen some of the rednecks us come up under. The days passed in a blaze of happiness. (359)

Within academic and clinical psychology, the autonomy of such characters has been relegated primarily to discussions of hallucinations, hysterical dissociations, split personalities. The non-pathological experience of the autonomy of imaginal others—as in the examples above—is neither dealt with in itself or allowed to influence clinical theory. There are some notable exceptions to this generalization, however (see Watkins, 1984). Let us approach Jung as one of these. Jung began his psychiatric career working in the asylum, surrounding himself with the voices and visions of patients’ psychoses. Rather than relegating the experience of imaginal figures to the limbo of pathology, he actively sought his own voices. This led him to his researches in the history of mythology, religion and alchemy. In these domains, Jung found support for his theory that imaginal figures are not necessarily evidence of pathology, but are indicative of the process of personification that occurs spontaneously in the “unconscious.”

Jung argues that it is not we who personify these figures but they who “have a personal nature from the beginning” (1968a, § 62). He tries to account for their autonomy with his notion of archetypes. The figures are not considered mere projections but issue from non-personal archetypes, from formative dispositions. The individual characters one experiences are both expressions of one’s ego and life and also variations on forms which exist independently of the person. In this way Jung accounts for the experience of the figures’ autonomy and
his observation of parallels in imagery across time and place.

When Jung engaged the imaginal figures that appeared to him in dialogue—such as Philemon—he directly experienced their autonomy.

Philemon and other figures of my fantasies brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life. Philemon represented a force which was not myself. In my fantasies I held conversations with him, and he said things which I had not consciously thought. For I observed clearly that it was he who spoke, not I. He said I treated thoughts as if I generated them myself, but in his view thoughts were like animals in the forest, or people in a room, or birds in the air, and added, “If you should see people in a room, you would not think that you made these people, or that you were responsible for them.” It was he who taught me psychic objectivity, the reality of the psyche. Through him the distinction was clarified between myself and the object of my thought. He confronted me in an objective manner, and I understood that there is something in me which can say things that I do not know and do not intend, things which may even be directed against me.

Psychologically, Philemon represented superior insight. He was a mysterious figure to me. At times he seemed to me quite real, as if he were a living personality. I went walking up and down the garden with him, and to me he was what the Indians call a guru. (Jung, 1961, § 183)

Whether we accept the theory of archetypes and Jung’s idea that “there are things in the psyche” that one does not produce, these are attempts to have theory conform to experience, rather than the other way around (as often, but not always, happens in psychoanalytic theory). This conformity of theory with experience involves Jung, on the one hand, in creating explanatory principles which have yet to be widely accepted. On the other hand, it leads to a set of therapeutic procedures which encourage one to pursue experiences with imaginal figures in the manner that they present themselves—to relate to them as autonomous.

Jung calls the process of engaging figures and images, coming to form a conscious relation to them, “active imagination.” He understands this process as an ancient one with many parallels in history.
In antiquity when a man had to direct a prayer to the statue of the god, he stepped upon a stone that was erected at its side to enable people to shout their prayer into the ear, so that the god would hear them, and then he stared at the image until the god nodded his head or opened or shut his eyes or answered in some way. You see this was an abbreviated method of active imagination, concentrating upon the image until it moved; and in that moment the god gave a hint, his assent or his denial or any other indication, and that is the numinosum. (Jung, 1937, 2)

Henry Miller describes just this sort of experience, albeit secularized:

Occasionally this same sort of bitchery would start up with statues, particularly chipped and dismantled ones. I might be loitering in some backyard gazing absentmindedly at a marble head with one ear missing and presto! it would be talking to me...talking in the language of a proconsul. Some crazy urge would seize me to caress the battered features, whereupon, as if the touch of my hand had restored it to life, it would smile at me. Then an even stranger thing might happen. An hour later, say, passing the plate glass window of an empty shop, who would greet me from the murky depths but the same proconsul! Terror stricken, I would press my nose against the shop-window and stare. There he was—an ear missing, the nose bitten off. And his lips moving! "A retinal hemorrhage," I would murmur, and move on. "God help me if he visits me in my sleep!" (1939, 10)

In a letter to a Mr. O, Jung described the process of active imagination this way:

The point is that you start with any image, for instance, with just that yellow mass in your dream. Contemplate it and carefully observe how the picture begins to unfold or to change. Don't try to make it into something, just do nothing but observe what its spontaneous changes are. Any mental picture you contemplate in this way will sooner or later change through a spontaneous association that causes a slight alteration of the picture. You must carefully avoid impatient jumping from one subject to another. Hold fast to the one image you have chosen and wait until it changes by itself, and if it is a speaking figure
at all then say what you have to say to that figure and
listen to what he or she has to say. (1973, 459-460)

If we approach the imaginal other as a projection resulting from
a defensive refusal to recognize certain qualities, feelings or wishes
in oneself—i.e., if we approach it from the point of view of our
usual psychoanalytic causal explanations—then the therapeutic move
involves a process of reclamation, whereby the ego attempts to recog-
nize, claim, and assimilate the psychic fragments which have appeared
in personified form. There is a widening of the ego as a multiplicity
of figures are absorbed and de-personified. From this point of view
the persistent autonomy of imaginal others is a negative or pathological
phenomenon. Recall Schafer’s admonition:

Too often, introjects are written about (and discussed in
the clinic) as if they were actual persons carrying on lives
of their own, with energies of their own, and with inde-
pendent intentions directed toward the subject.

...[T]hey should be treated merely as thoughts, ideas, or
information... For theory to portray representations in
any other way is to verge on an implicit demonology and
not to build an internally consistent and parsimonious
psychology. (1968, 83, 138-139)

Schafer certainly advocates an omniscient ego role and a de-
personification of psychic life, and his moves in therapy through
action language are meant to encourage this (see Schafer, 1976, 155-178).

While some imaginal figures are clearly personifications of
rejected possibilities for the self, can we account for all of them in
this way? Moreover, even if the self gains distance by dislocation and
personification of psychic possibilities, would not an intense recipro-
cal dialogue with the resulting imaginal figures ultimately mitigate
their supposed defensive function by requiring the self to come to
terms with them as partners in dialogue?

If we approach the experience of imaginal dialogues by valuing
the dramatic quality of mind which gives rise to imaginal worlds,
then the interpretive and explanatory moves which result from
projection theory and which aim at de-personifying and de-potentiat-
ing these figures become problematic. When the dramatic quality of
mind is valued, a different set of moves aimed at developing this
quality must be proposed. Such moves need not invite a demonology.
If we begin, as Jung did, with a respect for the imaginal other that sees the presence of a figure as a non-pathological occurrence (i.e., that views personifying as a spontaneous process not always serving a defensive function), then the activities of the imagining ego need not be de-personification, de-potentiation, reclamation, assimilation—but instead the building of relationships in dialogue. The self does not attempt to abolish the autonomous presence of the other. Development does not coincide with a move from presence to absence, from projection to assimilation, integrating the voices and figures. Rather development occurs in the dialogue between self and other, in the process of mutual articulation.

And it is dialogue that we find wherever autonomy is granted. Whether we note how Egyptians spoke to their Ba, Homeric men to their thumos,22 Henry Miller to his characters, or Jung to Philemon, dialogue is the consistent activity. “Dialogue is the ideal means of showing what is between the characters. It crystallizes relationship,” says Elizabeth Bowen (1975, 180).

We have focused on the experienced autonomy23 of the characters: the experiences of their initiating interactions, of their seeming to have lives apart from the ego, of their affecting the ego, creating the ego, as much as the ego them. In using the term “autonomy” I make no claim that such characters exist in objectified nature, in and of themselves, independently of their being experienced. Nor do I mean that their apprehended qualities are independent of their relationship with a particular ego.

I am, however, stressing that whereas psychological theory which values “abstract” thought would most often see changes from autonomy to dependence, de-personification, and assimilation as positive developments, theory which values “dramatic” thought would encourage a development toward autonomy of characters. Similarly, we find that theorists who reduce the development of thought to the development of abstract thought propose that the early multiplicity

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22 A man’s *thumos* tells him that he must now eat or drink or slay an enemy, it advises him on the course of his action, it puts words into his mouth... He can converse with it, or with his 'heart' or his 'belly,' almost as man to man. Sometimes he scolds these detached entities, usually he takes their advice, but he may also reject it (Dodds, 1951, 16).

23 See Casey (1976b, 175-234) for a discussion on how imagining itself can be seen as an autonomous act.
of specific characters in childhood play become, by adulthood, homogenized into a single voice, the "generalized other" as described by George Herbert Mead. The idea that characters become not only more autonomous but also more highly specified and discrete in their identities goes against the grain of much of developmental theory. But is it not precisely the particularity of characters that helps differentiate the multiplicity of perspectives which is so critical to the development of thought as well as literature and myth?