Character Development: The Articulation of the Imaginal Other
Chapter 9 of:

INVISIBLE GUESTS
The Development of Imaginal Dialogues

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CHAPTER NINE

Character Development:
The Articulation of the Imaginal Other

A character is interesting as it comes out and by the process and
duration of that emergence; just as a procession is effective by the
way it unfolds, turning into a mere mob if it all passes at once.
—Henry James

Tolstoy criticized Gorky: “Most of what you say comes out of
yourself, and therefore you have no characters, and all your people
have the same face.” —Tolstoy (quoted in Gorky, 1946, 21)

Tolstoy shares with Gorky his knowledge that when one does not allow characters their autonomy, one merely projects from oneself, lending them one’s own face. When one allows characters to speak, to be known apart from the self, then a depth and specificity of characterization can develop.

Similarly, in The Common Reader (1925) Virginia Woolf discusses the difference between Elizabethan drama and the modern novel. In the former, she claims, there were no real characters. For instance, in Ford’s Tis Pity She’s A Whore, we gropingly come to know that the character Annabella

...is a spirited girl, with her defiance of her husband when he abuses her, her snatches of Italian song, her ready wit, her simple glad love-making. But of character as we understand the word there is no trace. We do not know how she reaches her conclusions, only that she has reached
them. Nobody describes her. She is always at the height of her passion, never at its approach. Compare her with Anna Karenina. The Russian woman is flesh and blood, nerves and temperament, has heart, brain, body and mind where the English girl is flat and nude as a face painted on a playing card; she is without depth, without range, without intricacy. (53-54)

These two characters, Ford's Annabella and Tolstoy's Anna, are not just models of two different literary forms or of two different literary periods, but of two different kinds of relations to imaginal others.

When we reviewed Mead's theory of imaginal dialogues we followed the development of thought's interlocutors from the specific persona of childhood play to the generalized other of abstract thought. However if we focus on the development of dramatic thought then our emphasis will be on coming to know the imaginal others in all their specificity.

In this instance, a high degree of articulation of the imaginal other as well as a multiplicity of figures will characterize development. The more detailed the characterization of the other, the more differentiated is the characterization of the self. Novelists and playwrights are excellent guides in this domain. Many, such as Elizabeth Bowen, speak of patiently placing themselves in the presence of the imaginal other, and observing the details of the other's being. "They reveal themselves slowly to the novelist's perception—as might fellow-travellers seated opposite in a dimly-lit railway carriage" (1975, 172).

Trollope, writing in 1833, described how, in order to make his readers intimately acquainted with his characters, he himself had to get to know each figure in great detail.

...and [the author] can never know them well unless he can live with them in the full reality of established intimacy. They must be with him as he lies down to sleep, and as he wakes from his dreams. He must learn to hate them and to love them. He must argue with them, quarrel with them, forgive them, and even submit to them. He must know of them whether they be cold-blooded or passionate, whether true or false, and how far true, and how far false. The depth and the breadth, and the narrowness and the shallowness of each should be clear to him. And as, here in our outer world, we know that men and women
change—become worse or better as temptation or conscience may guide them—so should these creations of his change, and every change should be noted by him. On the last day of each month recorded, every person in his novel should be a month older than on the first. If the would-be novelist has aptitudes that way, all this will come to him without much struggling;—but if it do not come, I think he can only make novels of wood.

It is so that I have lived with my characters, and thence has come whatever success I have obtained. There is a gallery of them, and of all in that gallery I may say that I know the tone of the voice, and the colour of the hair, every flame of the eye, and the very clothes they wear. Of each man I could assert whether he would have said these or the other words; of every woman, whether she would then have smiled or so have frowned. (1833/1930, 49-50)

The development of depth of characterization corresponds to the development of the character’s autonomy. As the character becomes more autonomous, we know about its world not just from external observation or supposition but from the character directly. The author or narrator becomes less omniscient and can be surprised by the other. Observation of the character’s actions can be supplemented by the character’s own account of thoughts, feelings and wishes through which the imaginal other gains interiority and depth.

In a study of schizophrenics’ representations of imaginal figures in dreams, I found that the imaginal other (not the “I” of the dream) was often known only in terms of his/her behavior or action, and not in terms of thoughts, feelings, or wishes (Watkins, 1978). The descriptions of others were neither vivid nor realistic, but shallow and superficial. The dream ego did not respond to the character’s feelings and thoughts, thus de-centering the dream ego position, but assimilated the other’s actions with respect to the dream ego’s feelings and thoughts. Rather than pathology having to do with an over-articulation of an imaginary being and a weak ego or “I,” pathology coincided with shallowness in the characterization of the imaginal other and a marked egocentricity in which the imaginal other is known only insofar as it effects the “I.” Jung observed in schizophrenia and other forms of dissociation that characters such as homunculi, dwarfs, and boys often appeared having no individual characteristics at all (Jung and Kerenyi, 1949, 84).
Both in acting and in fiction-writing, the actor or writer becomes absorbed in the details of the imaginal other’s character, life, and point of view. For Henry James, “the artist is one on whom nothing is lost,” and he accused bad authors of “weak specification.” But as Flannery O’Connor points out,

...to say that fiction proceeds by the use of detail does not mean the simple, mechanical piling up of detail. Detail has to be controlled by some overall purpose, and every detail has to be put to work for you. Art is selective. What is there is essential and creates movement. (1961, 93)

The detailing work of the imaginal realm is not the same as that of the naturalistic realm. In the imaginal work, says O’Connor, details do not seek merely to replicate nature but “while having their essential place in the literal level of the story, operate in depth as well as on the surface” (1961, 71). That is, the selectivity of details contributes to their resonance on a symbolic level. Not all is said about a character but just enough detail. Virginia Woolf says of George Eliot’s characters, “even in the least important, there is a roominess and margin where those qualities lurk which she has no call to bring from their obscurity” (1925, 172). All that is presented, however, should be essential: “Every sentence in dialogue should be descriptive of the character who is speaking” (Bower, 1975, 181). The mind that comes to know the character, James said, should be “the most polished of possible mirrors.” That is, it should reflect the other rather than using the other as a prop in telling his own story.

Stanislavski, the famous Russian trainer of actors, taught that an actor should “not...present merely the external life of his characters,” but create the “inner life of human spirit” (1936, 14).

A playwright rarely describes the past or the future of his characters, and often omits details of their present life. An actor must complete his character’s biography in his mind from beginning to end because knowing how the character grew up, what influenced his behavior, and what he expects his future to be will give more substance to the present life of the character. (Moore, 1974, 30)

Let us look more formally at dimensions that would specify depth of characterization in imaginal dialogues: degree of animation of the imaginal other, degree of articulation of psychological properties,
degree of complexity of perspective on the character, and degree of specification of the identity of the character. These dimensions (outlined below) represent movement from a character in an imaginal dialogue who is a passive recipient of the other's actions—without thoughts, feelings, actions, or identity of her own—to a character whose identity is known, whose psychological properties (thoughts, feelings, and wishes) are articulated from both an internal and an external point of view, who is an active agent in her own right, and who is not just a one dimensional, stereotypic figure of only negative or only positive attributes.

1. Degree of animation
   a. Character is passive recipient of other's actions; character does not act or speak. Character is a prop for the other's actions and perceptions.
   b. Character is again the recipient of the other's actions, but acts or speaks in response to these actions. However character does not initiate actions.
   c. Character initiates actions and/or dialogue. He or she is no longer a passive recipient and reactive responder. Character can act upon the other(s) present (see Lowe, 1975).

2. Degree of articulation of psychological properties
   a. Character is known by actions alone.
   b. Psychological properties (thoughts, feelings, and wishes) are attributed to the character by another character or by the self (acting as a kind of narrator). Psychological properties are known from an external point of view only.
   c. Psychological properties are expressed by the character. They are known from an internal point of view and imply a self-conscious-ness on the part of the character.

   As the imaginal other's psychological properties become known from an internal point of view, the imaginal other is further liberated from being but an extension of the ego. Now the imaginal other's motivations, for instance, can be shown to contrast with the ones attributed to him or her by the imaginer.

   When a character is known only from its behavior or from an external point of view, the understanding of it is often superficial, fragmented, or distorted. The imaginer often assimilates and reduces
the character’s actions to the set of meanings which are important to
the ego, thus failing to allow the character’s presence and point of
view to de-center the habitual stance of the ego. The imaginer too
quickly assumes she understands what a character wants or feels, with-
out so much as attempting to ask. It is such assumptions that change
a basic telos of the experience of imagining itself from counteracting
egocentricity to sustaining it. In the latter instance the imaginal scene
and its people become servants to the usual, most powerful point of
view. In the former, as a character’s thoughts, feelings, and motivations
become known from its own point of view, it is freed from being but
a prop to the habitually central voice.

When one has no empathy for the other’s point of view his or her
actions often become incomprehensible. The members of the self-
other dyad are represented as acting either in mutual isolation or else
in such a way that the other’s action is assimilated to the point of
view of the ego. The motive or purpose which organizes various
actions into a meaningful pattern is missing. In Burke’s terminology
(1945), the other, the agent, becomes less differentiated from the scene.
Sometimes the motivation is then seen as coming from the outside,
from a third party who can control actions from afar. The (imagining)
ego is caught not in a world of the other’s larger acts, but in the
other’s series of fragmented behaviors. Action is not organized into
complex units, and there is no complex general project to which smaller
units of action are subordinated (Watkins, 1978, 54-55).

However the virtue of not knowing from the others’ point of
view their motivations and thoughts, is that indeed the scene can
then be an expression of the imagining ego’s point of view. The
satisfactions of egocentricity can go undisturbed by a semi-autonomy
of the other.

3. Degree of complexity of perspective on the character
   a. Character is known from an external perspective only.
      Although the character may act and may be attributed
      psychological properties, it is given no voice. The motivations
      for his or her actions are assumed.
   b. Character is known from an internal perspective. He ex-
      presses a point of view. His actions are understood from his
      point of view only.
c. Character is known from internal and external points of view. Here there is an alternation of perspectives on the character so that his actions and speech can be understood from both his point of view and from the other’s. Here one sees and can be seen.

At the beginning of this continuum (a), where the first character is known only through the second’s eyes, the first character serves the second’s self-image; for example, an assailant is created to sustain the other’s role as an innocent victim. At the end of this continuum (c), one character’s reality can be challenged by the other. The scene is deepened as the possibility arises for different constual or perspectives. “Characters possess degrees of being in proportion to the variety of perspectives from which they can with justice be perceived” (Burke, 1945, 503).

4. Degree of specification of identity of character
   a. The imaginal presence of the other is indicated by the self’s speech but by no other indication. The self speaks as thou to someone, but it is not clear to whom.
   b. The imaginal presence of the other can be noted by the linguistic structure of the thought or speech. For instance the phrases of speech meet the constraints of conversation or of dialogue, not monologue: where there is a question, an answer follows; where there is a comment, an acknowledgment follows. This is so despite the absence of any indication that the person is speaking to an imaginal other who has an identity other than that of the habitual self—such as a change in intonation, addressing a character by name or, if in play, designating a different play object to represent a character. Much of thought has this implicitly dialogical structure with no clear articulation as to who the speakers are; i.e., “Now what shall I do today? How about finishing up the paper? I don’t think there is enough time. You always say that.”

   For instance in the following segment of play, despite the absence of explicit reference to a separate character by name, changes in voice, or gesture, one can detect a conversation going on, an imaginal dialogue, between two voices which can be described as a “supportive instructor” voice and a “pupil” voice.
Example: David is engaged in solitary play with a tinker toy. He says the following: “The wheels go here, the wheels go here. Oh, we need to start it all over again. We need to close it up. See, it closes up. We’re starting it all over again. Do you know why we wanted to do that? Because I needed it to go a different way. Isn’t it going to be pretty clever, don’t you think? But we have to cover up the motor just like a real car.” (Kohlberg, et al., 1968, 695)

c. The other presents him or herself as a specific identifiable personality.