Minimal Narrative and the Paradox of Literary Character

Introduction

Fiction, David Foster Wallace said, is about what it is to be a human being (26). This assertion draws attention to a paradox. Fiction is essentially removed from the experience of being human. It is representation or, to put it differently, it is about what it is to be a human being rather than it is like what it is to be one. At the same time, fiction is more than a mere depiction of life. It provides readers with the means of understanding their experience in different, new, and immediate ways. In this sense, fiction becomes part of our being in the world. This sense of presence accounts for the fact that the most intuitive way of thinking about literary characters is to think of them as people. To think about characters in fiction as people in life is not a neutral process, but a partisan gesture in the struggle over the substrate of character as either a psychological analogue to the reader or as a compound of linguistic signs. This distinction is grounded in the rift between analytic practices that, broadly-speaking, fall within the purview of structuralism or semiotics on the one hand and that of narrative theory on the other.¹ As is the case with most monolithic theoretical distinctions, both sides have obvious merits: characters in fiction are made up of words, but they also frequently resemble people in thought and action. Even if they do not, it is difficult to think about them outside of the frame of likeness between character and person, however rudimentary it might be. Both conceptions of character are sound and there is little sense in trying to reconcile them simply because such a project mistakes a distinction in function for a distinction in essence. As John Frow points out, the psychological and structural conceptions of character operate at “distinct levels of analysis” (Character 17) rather than in exclusion of each other. This essay examines the psychological conception of character in light of what I call minimal narrative structure. These minimal structures do not refer to basic sequences of causally linked events which are read as the ‘story’ of a given character, but to any number of thoughts, images, and impressions that intimate a character’s interior life.
Character in fiction represents a crucial feature of literary response. I use the term literary following Derek Attridge’s notion of literature as texts that afford the reader “an opening to otherness” (Work 16). For Attridge, literature represents a group of works that expand the horizons of the reader’s experience beyond familiar limits. It manifests itself as “surprise or unfamiliarity” (Work 55), the apprehension of which unsettles the set of presuppositions and expectations of the reader in the experience of otherness. As far as character is concerned, literature can serve to acquaint the reader with “a quality of emotion” (Work 18) never felt before. Most importantly, Attridge insists that texts do not simply have or lack literary quality, but that the literary is inextricably enmeshed with the mode of reading. In other words, one does not simply read the literary as a certifiable feature of the text, but reads for it. I adopt both the conception of literary character as a potential site for making one’s own experience new by turning the reader toward unexplored possibilities of self-understanding, and the conception of literary reading as a wilful act of interpretation that reads for character even in texts that belong to a tradition in which figures, symbols, and allegories take precedence over fully-fledged realist character.² By self-understanding I do not refer to the process of understanding or exploring a preconceived identity on the part of the reader, but as the constitution of a subject position, conceived as a feature of the self by the reader in the interaction with a given text.

The notion of the literary and the concept of character amplify the paradoxical nature of fiction which has created a number of critical contradictions that dominate contemporary debates of character. Most notably, these contradictions manifest in the critique of sympathetic identification as a valid reading practice in discussions of the nature of otherness in the context of post-humanism. The conception of character as minimal narrative makes it possible to negotiate these contradictions by using paradox as the fundamental characteristic of literary character. This theoretical manoeuvre allows for a discussion of character in terms
of what I call minimal narrative – textual fragments indicative of psychological continuity – without previously postulating a unified theoretical account of character in fiction. Paradox and minimal narrative offer a suitable way of thinking about character as a set of contradictory impulses and ideas that ensure that character always manifests concretely in the faintest narrative traces. The first section of this essay offers a theoretical discussion of the contradictory critique that has been levelled against the psychological conception of character and the notion of identification in reading. The second section consists of a close reading of J.M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) in which I apply the idea of minimal narrative to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the character of the novel’s eponymous protagonist who has primarily been read allegorically alongside everyman figures such as Herman Melville’s Bartleby and Franz Kafka’s K figures.

**Critical contradictions: from uncritical reading to critical sympathy**

It might seem contradictory to enlist the concept of the literary in an investigation of the psychological conception of character given its association with the poetic or textual being of literature. In his seminal essay “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?”, first published in 1933, L.C. Knights takes up the distinction between characters as psychological complexes and characters as textual constructs in his defence of literary criticism as the study of the latter. He can invoke such a rift rather comfortably since his adversaries, at least according to Knights, endorse a sentimental view of character. This view locates the apex of literature in writers like Walter Scott and dismisses modernism as a mere smudge on the surface of literature’s most important feature, the creation of believable character, which has been plumbed to its depth by Scott and his peers. Against this background, Knights can dismiss his opposition as unworthy of serious consideration given their disregard for novels such as *Wuthering Heights, Heart of Darkness, Ulysses,* and *To the Lighthouse,* for their lack of
satisfactory characters. Today, this will strike readers as a strange assertion given that these novels feature some of the most studied and discussed (and beloved and reviled) characters in literature in English. It is only possible in the context of a form of literary criticism which opposes the study of character defined as emotional identification with a given author’s “handling of literature” (Knights 279). If literary criticism has moved beyond this dichotomy, it has not abandoned the sardonic dismissal of identification as a feature of critical reading.

Michael Warner (15-6) has pointed out that the ubiquitous endorsement of critical reading does not derive from a clear definition of which practices of reading could be called critical, but from the implicit opposition to a set of self-evidently uncritical, that is, naïve or unexamined, practices. Identification with fictional characters is as prominent a target of critical reading in contemporary critical discourse as it is in the question Knights ridicules in the title of his essay. This state of affairs gives rise to a logical paradox: critical reading, understood as “any self-conscious practice of reading” (Warner 16), un-self-consciously posits a unified subject in the tradition of Kant at its centre. The critical reader is the enlightened individual who sheds her self-imposed nonage (Unmündigkeit), which Immanuel Kant (33) defines as the inability to exercise one’s reason without another’s guidance. The shedding of external guidance, however, only retains its virtue if it occurs within a context in which the individual is deemed in full control of her reason and intellectual abilities. This celebration of rationalism, as Michel Foucault argues, can become complicit with despotism. If a political regime is in accordance with universal reason, or establishes itself as such, then “the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience” (37). Louis Althusser (170-83) demonstrates how this mechanism of subjectification maintains the ideological status quo of capitalism which, as D.A. Miller argues (192-220), operates with full force in the tradition of nineteenth-century realism to define and reproduce the liberal reading subject. Without wanting to dismiss critical reading as a valuable scholarly practice,
it is worth noting that it has attained an academic status that can be compared to Foucault’s regime whose authority is derived from a claim to universal reason. This has created a state of affairs in which critical reading, ironically, might be the most uncritically endorsed academic practice, at least as far as the study of literature is concerned. From this perspective, the critical reader implicitly falls prey to the universalizing projection of the conventions of bourgeois individualism the uncritical reader explicitly mobilizes in the act of identification (Frow, “Spectacle” 228).

The collusion of critical reading and universal reason that fuels its projects even beneath the mantle of self-consciousness, deconstruction, and relativism, has caused strong polemical reactions (Latour). While this debate rages on, the study of character can make some headway in the resolution of this issue by abandoning the notion of the reading subject in favour of a series of subject positions that mark the intersection of various desires, needs, and perspectives, established in the reciprocal relationship of reader and text. Furthermore, a subject position does not need to be “single and univocal” (Frow, “Spectacle” 245) and therefore elides the despotic rationalism of the Enlightenment subject. Frow’s insistence on the importance of position over character destabilizes the idea that a preconstituted subject is identical to preconstituted literary character. Instead he suggests that one should think of character and the reading subject as mutually constitutive of each other, so that the latter assumes “a specific identity in the identification of and, hence, identification with the identity of a character” (“Spectacle” 239). This approach to identification, which highlights the fictionality of character and person alike, makes it possible to think about identification in reading outside of the psychological/semiotic or sentimental/poetic binaries as much as it rehabilitates identification as a valid feature of analytic reading. The sphere of the literary offers fertile ground for this conception of identification since it conceives of reading as a fluid response in which reader and text stand in a reciprocal relation to each other. Narrative
is the immitigable ground of this conception of identification as it facilitates the interaction between minimal poetic or symbolic structures and the intimation of a larger narrative coherence.

Attridge couches his notion of literature in the concept of singularity, which serves him to describe the relationship between work and reading as an opening to otherness and which retains the fluid relationship between reader and text. He understands singularity as the experience of uniqueness that arises from the reading of a text that is, initially, a “configuration of general properties” (*Work* 56). It does not occur “outside the responses of those who encounter and thereby constitute it” (*Singularity* 64) so that the singularity of the work speaks to the singularity of the reader. While Attridge’s approach to literature and reading is embedded within New Critical practices of close reading, Levinasian ethics, and the work of Derrida, his language at times slides into that of a deceptively facile humanism. A literary reading, following Attridge, is one that explores the sense that a text speaks to “my inmost, perhaps secret being” and that it “utters thoughts I have long nurtured but never had the power to express” (*Singularity* 78). And although the work of literature works³ to shock or shake the reader rather than to confirm existing beliefs and preconceptions, that is, to subvert the emotional comfort of the sentimental, it also has ties to the key concept of sentimentalism: sympathy. Attridge appropriates this term, after cautioning his readers not to understand it as a “simple matching between mind and work,” but as a “positive openness” (*Singularity* 81) that characterizes the mode of reading that responds to the literary quality of a work. In spite of sympathy’s long-standing association with bourgeois subjectivity in the tradition of Adam Smith’s definition in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), it can be repurposed to mean a basic responsiveness to the other that aptly describes how readers interact with literary characters. Sympathy’s philosophical legacy, however, makes it an easy target for the critique which posits it as the handmaiden to the ideological recreation of the
bourgeois subject via sympathetic projection and identification (Betensky). It is not a coincidence that questions of literary character and their relation to readers do not figure largely in Attridge’s work. He often conducts his close readings on texts that feature characters whose interiority is excluded from the text (the kid in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (“Once”), or characters of an exceptional interiority it would be presumptuous to interpret in any other than general terms (the five-year old narrator in Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (Work 150-5), or who represent more of a type than an individual character (Michael K in Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*) ([*J.M. Coetzee*](#) 32-64). Nonetheless, Attridge’s conception of the literary makes it possible to think about reading as a process that unfolds through a series of subject positions. It is open-ended and directed towards the other and thereby offers a way of thinking about identification outside of the nefarious reproduction of realism’s liberal clone readers. Furthermore, his definition of sympathy allows him to sidestep the charge of intersubjective violence frequently raised against sympathy and its etymological and conceptual relative empathy, and thereby to negotiate another important contradiction relating to the concept of character and sympathy.

To identify with another person by an act of sympathetic projection, Peter Goldie points out, is to usurp the other’s perspective by imaginatively replacing the other with oneself (303-6). To take another’s perspective, in this view, is not to see the world as the other does, but as oneself would do in her place. According to Goldie, sympathetic deliberation also fails to acknowledge the unconscious nature of character, that is, the necessary lack of self-awareness that defines what we call character in the first place. The most pointed example he gives is that of modesty, which, if it is practiced in full consciousness, becomes disingenuous. The unconscious aspect of personality can be used to strike a fatal blow to the psychological conception of character particularly since it undermines the idea of sincerity understood as expression in correspondence with its source.
(that is, the defined and contained self of the liberal subject). Once sincerity is made an impossibility in literature, reading is forced to acknowledge the blind spot character in fiction represents. Hélène Cixous has described the post-Freudian dilemma that arises with the knowledge that to take character as the “representation of a true subject” is to turn it into a marionette since the unconscious, which animates subjectivity itself, is “unanalyzable, uncharacterizable” (387). This psychoanalytic thought does not inform Goldie’s thinking, but persists in his implied distinction between the unconscious, inmost being of self and its expressive surface. Interestingly, he chooses similarly humanist language as Attridge to describe the ineffable core of personhood which he describes as the “full-blooded agency” (311) of first-personal being. In this view, sympathy is an inadequate means for understanding character since character is defined by and preserves an unanalysable core. This is where a paradox takes hold: to understand character in its full-blooded immediacy of being, one has to resort to more distanced ways of engaging with the other in order to establish the other’s immediacy.

Phenomenology offers the converse of this strategy in a turn to the radically immediate conception of embodiment. The latter has been described by Jean-Paul Sartre (2003) by virtue of a distinction between knowing and living. For Sartre, humans as self-conscious beings are always implicated within an intersubjective network that shapes and constitutes their conception of self and others. This act of self-constitution, however, does not unfold at the level of knowledge, that is, the level of deliberate projection or inference by analogy as it does for Goldie, but on the level of embodied phenomenology. Emotional states such as shame and pride do not primarily give us knowledge about ourselves and others, although they can hone that knowledge, but constitute our living the relations to others prior to any conscious epistemological action; in other words, another version of the full-bloodedness of being with others. The reason the bifurcation between the remote and
immediate model on intersubjectivity is relevant to a discussion of character is that these two
 tropes still represent the most urgent matters of contention about the status of character in
 literature. If sympathy and the characters of nineteenth-century literature make a case for the
 importance of distance in an affective economy that binds reader to text, the notion of touch
 or contagion appears to be more obviously operative in the portrayal of intersubjectivity in
 twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. These contradictions become truly paradoxical
 when the other is a literary character. Characters in fiction can be integral to our experience
 of shame and pride, that is, are conterminous with our affective response, and therefore share
 in the experience of immediacy that shapes the phenomenology of everyday life in spite of
 the fact that their existence is unembodied and unanalysable. This latter feature is particularly
 obvious in texts featuring characters that cannot easily be classified as human.

 Nancy Armstrong gives a summary of this critique in her attempt to establish what
 she terms the affective turn in contemporary fiction by finding the epitaph to sympathetic
 reading in novels featuring characters that are either non-human or barely recognizable as
 such. She labels these characters extremophiles, “apparently damaged, subhuman, or
 insufficiently individuated” (442) human beings whose radically different interiority
 undermines the universalizing effect of bourgeois sympathy. Armstrong makes her case
 against sympathy on the basis of the claim that the affective economy of traditional realism
 pivots on “the exchange between narrator and addressee . . . the exchange of first and second
 persons that [Adam] Smith called ‘sympathy’” (448), and that this no longer applies to
 contemporary fiction. Contemporary novels break down the framework for such an exchange
 in the presentation of extremophiles which are neither first nor second but third persons and
 therefore are excluded from sympathetic identification. For Armstrong, the third person lies
 outside the protocols of sympathy and can only be salvaged within the context of the latter in
 speculations about what she calls “somatic thinking” and describes as moments when
“thinking, feeling, and physical sensation” (450) dissolve in the minds of an extremophile. This dissolution of the boundaries between cognitive, affective, and proprioceptive action offers a subject position that is radically transgressive in regard to the integral borders of the “autonomous bubble of consciousness” (445) implicit to sympathy. The inhuman vitality or animal energy that animates all human being is played out against the normative action of sympathy and the model of personhood it implies and actualizes. It puts into place an embodied immediacy of being that corrodes the idea that “being a self-contained subject is the best and only way of being fully human” (458) within the context of studies of the post-human and inhuman. The escape from bourgeois individuality into the embodied immediacy of life is problematic in the case of fiction since literary characters are second-order representations of people at the same time as their lives can become part of our affective lives. The view that takes the literary as the product of a reader’s response to a text already understands immediacy of character as a figurative presence in the event of reading while it endows this presence with an immediate being in the experience of the reader. It shifts attention away from the potential intersubjective conundrum of cases like the extremophile and places it on the question how the reader generally experiences otherness in reading. As far as questions of response are concerned, the opposition of distance and immediacy is more productive if it is taken as the demarcation of a spectrum of response that marks out the fluid relation readers will have with characters. The focus on response emphasizes that claims about distance and immediacy always figure their reverse, even if this figuration is oblique, a fact which is blatant in the case of criticism on Coetzee’s Life & Times of Michael K.

Armstrong dedicates most of her article to a reading of the clones in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go (2005), but lists the eponymous protagonist of Coetzee’s novel as another example of the extremophile and describes him as “born to be excluded from sympathetic identification” (462). In linking the character of Michael K to the emerging field of what one
could call transpersonal literature, Armstrong follows an established tradition of reading Coetzee’s character as everyman, modern man, or animal-man in the context of fabulist or allegorical texts ranging from Melville’s Bartleby to Kafka’s hunger artist and the inhabitant of the burrow. The tension between reading for individual character and literary-historical character-type represents another aspect of the paradox of literary character. At the most basic level, character implies deviation from type. In nineteenth-century realism, as Catherine Gallagher shows, this conception of character leads to the puzzling assertion that fully-fledged (or full-blooded) characters first emerge exactly as a type of digression or, as she puts it, as “types from which they must depart” (66) in order to become ‘real’. Intertextual readings exploit the latitude of the general aspect of character in order to unearth lines of continuity and influence, as in the case of Michael K and Kafka’s K characters. These readings necessarily neglect or discard the singularity of a given text and particularly that of character. Given that all readings are constrained, this neglect would not be noteworthy were it not for the almost hegemonic status it has attained in the case of reading Life & Times and the fact that this hegemony creates the sense that Coetzee’s novel functions primarily in a way to undermine and complicate notions of sympathy. In this context the fact that readings bear as much on texts as they serve to elucidate them is obscured or even lost. If Michael K is read as a figure that lays open the inhuman foundation of humanity it does so in a tradition of interpretation that is already marked by its desire towards abstraction; that is to say, the inhumanity perceived in Michael is not necessarily a feature of the text but a concomitant of the mode of reading brought to bear on it. Whether one sees Michael as an extremophile life form, a “Gaian ideograph” (Wright 439) or as homo tantus, a man without qualities (Hardt and Negri 203-4), the fact remains that any novel that traces the dissolution of character and subjectivity still demarcates and positively formulates both of these concepts. The space for this positive formulation is that of the literary and specifically that of narrative. The concept
of paradox coupled with the idea of literary reading makes it possible to read Michael’s character as oblique and to formulate a view of character that is more flexible and productive than those caught within oppositions of text and person, critical and uncritical reading, and distance and immediacy. A part of this reformulation is the activation of what one can call critical sympathy – structures of desire related to characterization, identification, and self-knowledge in the spirit of Attridge’s positive openness.

**Minimal Narrative and Michael K**

In a notebook Coetzee kept during the composition of *Life & Times* he writes: “There is a fundamental flaw in all my novels; I am unable to move from the side of the oppressors to the side of the oppressed” (quoted in Atwell 110). David Atwell describes this self-reprobation as an instance in which “desire, empathy and social belonging” conflict with the contingency of the act of writing in a particular social, historical, racial, and literary context. For Atwell, Coetzee mediates this conflict by locating Michael’s ineluctable otherness in “language itself,” thereby creating a sense of alienation that leads the reader to question the “habits of thought” (110-1) preventing the empathetic impasse Coetzee encountered in writing the novel. Writing born out of a desire to break out of the ideological solipsism of the subject is, I would say following Attridge, quintessentially literary. More than that, it is expressive of desire which can only take the shape of paradox and, specifically, the paradoxical relations readers have with literary characters. Anne Carson describes the experience of desire, which desires a fulfilment that would spell the end of desire, as essentially paradoxical: “A paradox is a kind of thinking that reaches out but never arrives at the end of its thought. Each time it reaches out, there is a shift of distance in mid-reasoning that prevents the answer from being grasped . . . Each [paradox] contains a point where the reasoning seems to fold into itself and disappear, or at least that is how it feels. Each time it disappears, it can begin again, and so the reach continues” (81). What is at stake in reading literary texts for character is one’s
commitment to the movement of desire that takes the reading subject into the current of subject positions made available by the text. Character is not simply a matter of literary form or genre – the allegorical mode of Kafka and Melville, for example – but the mode of reading brought to bear on the narrative structures of a given text. Critical reading has become too sophisticated to ignore the self-imposed pressure of interpretation that fuels its internal motor. If E.M. Forster, in 1927, could illustrate the difference between story and plot with the examples “The king died and then the queen died” and “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” (60) respectively, a critical reading of these two sentences today could make a valid claim that the former in fact illustrates the inherent instability of plot by implementing it as an implicit absence. The sentence makes the reader’s responsibility for meaning-making explicit exactly by being implicit, that is, by not using the causal explanation “of grief” in order to say the very same thing. The point is not that critical reading has reached a point of intellectual hypertrophy, but that character has always been placed within the reach of the reader’s desire to engage with a text as a literary artefact. To put it differently, the literary text becomes literary in part when various forms of identification with different subject positions are brought to the reading in order to illuminate, modify, or radically change the reader’s habits of thought, as Atwell puts it, or to open the reader to the otherness of the text, as Attridge does.

Like most of Coetzee’s novels, *Life & Times* exhaustively performs its self-conscious anxiety over narrativity. The text is divided into three parts, the first and last of which are narrated in a third-person voice that hovers “between free indirect discourse and narratorial reporting” (Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee* 53). The narrator makes privileged speculations about Michael’s thoughts and feelings but also asserts his distance from the character by constant recourse to discourse markers such as “he thought.” The second part is narrated in the first-person by a medical officer at the Kenilworth prison camp in which Michael is temporarily
incarcerated under the charge of conspiring with rebel forces. Since Michael staunchly refuses to divulge any information about himself, the officer’s account increasingly turns into a fable of Michael’s life, told against his will. Critics generally compare this part of the narrative to instances in which one character takes it upon him- or herself to tell the story of another, and read it as a critique of liberal-humanist discourse and its failure to adequately account for the radically other (see Attridge, J.M. Coetzee 32-64; Dovey; Morphet). In his reading of such narratives in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Age of Iron* (1990), Gilbert Yeoh describes the attempts of these characters to tell the story of the barbarian girl and Vercueil, respectively, as “a self-serving deception” offering consolation to the narrators and relieving them of the burden of constructing “a genuine narrative of empathy” (340). Although much is to be gained from scrutinizing the implicit assumption of authority and sympathetic usurpation at work in the stories told by these characters, the problem remains in the case of *Life & Times* that this assessment of the medical officer’s account as self-serving or insincere implicitly designates the first and third part of the narrative as more direct and sincere. Mike Marais, for example, argues that the two narrative modes can roughly be categorized as showing, which “strives to render language transparent” and telling, which “lays bare the narrational process” (114), in the first and third and the second section, respectively. As Marais notes, however, the act of telling suggests to the reader that the seeming immediacy of showing is itself only a disguised form of telling.

The novel performs this visibility at various points, most poignantly in passages that explicitly discuss Michael’s inability to function as a narrator. He is not capable of becoming either the subject or the object of his own life story: “Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong” (109-10). Michael
represents an elusive subject within the context of conventional realist narration which founds characterization on the reader’s sympathetic identifications. When Michael arrives in Laingsburg on his way to his mother’s birth place, he stops outside a shop window where he is approached by the unnamed stranger who will provide him with food and shelter later in the day. For now, Michael “was standing before a display of children’s clothing in a dim shop window when someone passed behind him, halted, and came back. ‘It’s curfew when the bell goes,’ said a voice. ‘You’d better get off the street.’ K turned. He saw a man younger than himself wearing a green and gold track suit and carrying a wooden tool-chest. What the stranger saw he did not know” (47). On the one hand this scene reminds the reader of how utterly inaccessible Michael’s consciousness is even to the narrator. What Michael thinks about what the stranger sees when he (the stranger) looks at him (Michael) is beyond the narrator’s grasp. We do not know if Michael only perceives the stranger once he begins talking, or if he hears him pass behind him, or if he catches his reflection in the shop window. On the other hand, to say that Michael does not know what the stranger sees is to suggest that Michael can point to his own inability of seeing himself from an external perspective. The passage demonstrates how the narrative is forcibly suspended in uncertainty, only capable of writing out its own inability to access Michael’s mind. In this fashion, however, it does not simply isolate Michael within a carapace of otherness, but leaves a trace of subjectivity, sketched out minimally, to which the reader can relate sympathetically. This trace is a challenge to the reader. It calls for an engagement with Michael’s character while it also cautions against the possibility of easy identification with him.

In the episode preceding this scene Michael also stands outside a shop window, staring at a woman behind the counter after having been forcibly pushed out of it by her just moments before. In this instance the text does not comment on the unavailability of Michael’s mind, but gives a seemingly neutral description of his behavior: “On shelves
behind her K could make out canned food, packets of mealie-meal and sugar, detergent powders. On the floor in front of the counter was a basket of lemons. He held a banknote flat against the glass above his head. The old woman did not budge” (45). This is quintessentially realist narration, details providing the frame and surface of an action whose meaning is assumed to be immanent. It is clear that Michael understands his unexpected eviction as a reaction to his ragged appearance which leads him to assert his customer status by holding money above his head as if waving a white flag. Realist narration lives off the illusion of completion as, in this instance, nothing intimates what else Michael might be thinking or feeling, presenting the moment as self-sufficiently meaningful. The parallel scene in Laingsburg can be read as a comment on this supposed self-sufficiency, which is made visible not by giving a more rounded portrait of Michael’s inner life, but by drawing attention to the absence and impossibility of such knowledge. The immanence of psychological causation that connects a bank note held above the head and the self-consciousness that motivates this action is not always given in Michael’s case. The word-mirror of realism is broken, one can conclude with the protagonist of another of Coetzee’s novels; however without accepting her conclusion: “irreparably, it seems” (Coetzee, *Elizabeth* 19). Just because the mirror is broken, its fragments do no stop reflecting. In the case of Michael, the mirror held up to character might have been shattered under the pressures of the post-human and the allegorical drift of interpretation, but its fragments still leave a signature of character in the traditional sense. Coetzee’s novel, I have said, performs its visibility as narrative most obviously when it juxtaposes Michael’s inability to tell his own story with the flawed narrative of the medical officer, all the while telling Michael’s story from beginning to end. There is little doubt that Michael is an unusual character and that he does not offer himself up for sympathetic identification as readily as other characters in literature, but that does not eradicate the fact that there remains a psychological trace to which the reader can relate
sympathetically. This trace is narrative or, to put it differently, is constituted by what I would call Michael’s minimal narrative.

Consider, for example, one of the most discussed and, according to Coetzee, the novel’s “most politically naked moment” (“Interview” 207), in which Michael, hiding out in the countryside, observes a band of rebels from afar and wonders whether he should join them: “K knew that he would not crawl out and stand up and cross from darkness into firelight to announce himself. He even knew why: because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow had and forget her children. That’s why” (109). Aside from its obvious implication for the reading of Michael’s refusal to become part of the war, it offers a striking example of how his enigmatic mind leads the narrative voice to take refuge in allegory. As in many instances in the first part of the novel, the narrative voice oscillates between the direct presentation of Michael’s thoughts – ‘That’s why’ – and more abstract thoughts that intimate the presence of an interpreter smoothing out the disjointed stream of thoughts. One wonders whether it is Michael who wants to save the idea of gardening or if this is the narrator’s understanding of Michael’s desire to keep gardening, taken literally, alive. This allegorical inclination appears somewhat opposed to the literal bend of Michael’s mind who spends a considerable part of the narrative tending to vegetation and vegetables instead of musing about what the concept of gardening and cultivation reveals about his place in the progress of what the medical officer calls “the wheels of history” (159). In this sense, the passage also represents a diegetically naked moment in which the narrative voice asserts its presence in the act of representation. At the same time, the image of a broken cord is the second stage in Michael’s own narrative. Earlier in the story, when Michael flees the Visage farm after the arrival of the grandson, he stops to contemplate a return. He regrets abandoning
the pumpkins he grew there and which are bound to rot without his care. He considers returning to prevent the “cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam” from being cut: “It seemed to him that one could cut a cord like that only so many times before it would not grow again” (66). Michael, unconsciously or not, here begins to sketch out his life story by the image of a cord that connects him to the earth and which ultimately leads him to assert his identity as a gardener later on.

In the third part of the novel, Michael encounters a man who asks him about his life. The answer is problematic. At first, Michael gives a list incidents – his stay at the Kenilworth prison camp, his erstwhile employment as a gardener as an adolescent, his mother’s occupation, among other things – only to conclude that they cannot make up his story the way he wants to tell it. As he realized before, his story is still “full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bridge” (176). In place of a story, he settles on a series of self-identifications: “the truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground . . . I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence. But a mole or an earthworm on a cement floor” (181-2). David Babcock reads this passage as the emergence of a new site of identity in which Michael both asserts “his distance from the human,” where gardeners turn into worms and moles, and makes explicit his link to humanity since, having returned to the place from where he set out on his wandering without any notable change in situation, he remains tethered to “the same squalid, degraded conditions in which he began” (901). The incongruity between his wormness and the concrete ground articulate this space of possibility in which, Babcock concludes, character exists outside the definitional tyranny of the biopolitical state: “In a biopolitical regime, where social value is equated with what is tractable in the last instance, the remote locations where tractability is limited become wellsprings of character,
however minimal its form” (902-3). While I employ a more narrow notion of ‘character’ in fiction than Babcock, who does not explicitly define his use of the term, I would argue that his account is compatible with my own in regard to the endeavour of locating character within a network of different definitional pressures, be it those of allegory or of the biopolitical state, whose ultimate substrate is narrative. Even though Michael encounters seemingly insurmountable obstacles when he attempts to tell his life story, the novel charts out such a story in minimal imagery, such as the cord that connects him to the earth, within the realist narration and imagery that serves to situate Michael in a larger context of meaning. The attenuation of subjectivity inherent in the breakdown of a realist mode that complicates regular sympathetic protocols makes itself felt most directly in passages in which Michael remains as opaque to himself as to the readers. The cord that connects an impulse to gardening with his identity, however, persists throughout the novel and serves a narrative purpose even if, as Babcock points out, the identity of the gardener Michael settles on, is not a conventional one. It is a narrative of character, nonetheless.

Narratives of self, no matter how slight, intimate a fullness of character that resonates with the reader in such a sympathetic reading. That this fullness ultimately can be revealed as only so many words or projections from a privileged and illusory (liberal) subjective centre does not undo either its presence or its relevance, but drives home that literary character remains a paradox. As Carson (109) points out, all paradoxes are in some way paradoxes about paradoxes. Character in fiction is not only a paradox, but the paradox of the broken mirror which reflects all the more for having been shattered and freed from constraints of a unified reflection; it engenders the contradiction of the critique of the liberal subject in the context of rational argument; it is the contradiction of the post-human subject seeking to undo itself in language; and, ultimately, it is the paradox of fiction which highlights the fictionality of the real.
1 Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* still is the classical source for structuralist conceptions of character. The most uncompromising definition of character in this tradition is that of the actant, a purely syntactic unit without any semantic or ideological content (Greimas and Courtés 5-6). Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* has had great influence on narrative-based conceptions of identity and selfhood in literary studies. Generally, the idea of narrative as the foundation of character and selfhood has been explored in various theoretical approaches to literature, from studies of autobiographical writing (Eakin) to evolutionary literary criticism (Boyd) and informs advances in the cognitive study of fictional character (Vermeule).

2 For excellent readings of wilfulness and rebelliousness in character-identification see Sara Ahmed’s “Willful Parts” (2011) and Lesley Goodman’s “Rebellious Identification” (2010).

3 The tautology is not gratuitous. Attridge prefers the word ‘work’ over ‘text’ because it highlights the act of creative labour present in the text; “not something left behind but something sensed in the reading” (*Work* 28). For Attridge this distinction works at the level of reading. Reading a work of literature takes into account the presence of this creative effort while the reading of a text could be conducted purely for the purpose of gaining information. In this sense, his definition of these two terms reverses the more well-known one of Roland Barthes (155-6).

4 Strictly speaking, Goldie does not discuss sympathy but empathy. The distinction between these two concepts is notoriously difficult and complicated by various definitions of each brought forward in different academic disciplines. For the purpose of the current argument I will use the two concepts synonymously since Goldie’s conception of empathy as imaginative projection that fails to produce knowledge representative of the other’s inner experience does not differ drastically from conceptions of sympathy in the tradition of Smith. For a history of the distinction of the term see Wispé.

5 Recently critics have mapped the distinction between distanced and immediate conceptions of intersubjectivity as features of literary style onto the literary-historical progression from realism to modernism, respectively. Consider, for example, Rebecca N. Mitchell’s *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference* (2011), Rae Greiner’s *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Realism* (2012), and Meghan Marie Hammond’s *Empathy and the Psychology of Literary Modernism* (2014).
Armstrong makes specific reference to Hardt and Negri’s comment on Michael K as a Bartleby figure (Empire 203-4). For more detailed discussions of this connection see Chesney. The best overview of the relation between the work of Coetzee and Kafka is Patricia Merivale’s “Audible Palimpsests: Coetzee’s Kafka.”

Susan Sontag memorably describes this development in “Against Interpretation” (1966). A lesser known but equally intriguing account of the dominance of intellectual concepts in criticism is Leslie Fiedler’s “From Ethics and Aesthetics to Ecstatics” (1982).

At times his inability appears so severe as to be symptomatic of dysnarrativia, “a severe impairment in the ability to tell or understand stories” that entails “an almost complete loss of the ability to read other minds, to tell what others might have been thinking, feeling, even seeing” (Bruner 86). For a more detailed analysis of dysnarrativia and storytelling see Eakin (123-30).
**Works Cited**


