Reading Character

The title of this paper is meant to be ambiguous, moving between the reading of literary character and the more familiar sense in which we try to read someone’s moral character, to “sum them up” — something we still do in all sorts of circumstances, not least when we are employing people or counselling them. So it is at this interface between literary conceptions of character and the formation of moral character that this paper primarily is addressed. It tries to clear the ground for an area of research rather than deliver the findings of that research. And it does so by reformulating what is usually described as the problem of the social determination of literary production (at least this is the way it is described in more or less Marxist sociologies of literature). For me the problem is one of trying to describe the conditions of emergence of literary objects — in this instance, the object “character” — without reducing these conditions either to the subjectivities of artist and reader or to the action of an extrinsic socio-economic context. And it is this reformulation which is undertaken here, an activity best seen as a preliminary investigation into the emergence of a new literary-moral object during the nineteenth century, namely the modern form of “character.”

At this point, I should perhaps indicate a couple of theoretical coordinates in which this work is situated. On the one hand the question of the social determination of literary production has its classical Marxist form, the “pioneering” form in which literature is said to exist in a domain of consciousness or expression, and is explained in terms of its origin in “social being” (to use Marx’s phrase). This produces the model of the base and the superstructure whereby the superstructure consists of the ideological, legal and aesthetic forms and is thought of as expressing or as mystifying (in the form of ideology) particular modes of production and their class relations. Of course this model has its crude and its sophisticated forms, but from the point of view of this paper they are equally problematic in so far as they employ the two-term model of real determination/reflection in consciousness.

This model is first problematised from within Marxism in the work of Louis Althusser and his collaborators. We can sum up Althusser’s advance quite simply. It is to insist that one does not have two homogeneous domains: one does not have a domain of real determinations (economic, historical, material) and a domain of representation or thought. Althusser denies the bipolar model by insisting on the materiality of representation; that is, the Althusserian intervention insists on the “relative autonomy” of the various instances of the social, and this reformulation is brought about by conceiving of aesthetic and legal forms as material practices in their own right. The slogans in this area are now quite well known. There is an insistence that representations arise from material practices, and do not originate in a homogeneous faculty of
recognition ("mind") in the form of a general relation between consciousness and things. Rather, representations result from diverse practices and techniques, among which we find those resulting in the emergence of literary objects like character. The upshot of working with the Althusserian account is that one is no longer looking at a problem of mediation. In dealing with the question of the determination of literary forms, one is not thinking of them as mediating real relations of production and thought-relations (or the relations of reflection). The relations between economic forms and forms of representation will not be as univocal as this.

By comparison, in classical Marxist cultural criticism, as represented in the work of Raymond Williams and Georg Lukács, culture plays precisely this mediating role. For example, in Williams' recent book, *Culture*, we find, on the one hand, an institutionalised market determining the form aesthetic production must take (for example, the theatre and its relations of production and consumption, or the publishing industry). On the other hand, in Williams' model, there is a domain of aesthetic initiatives and needs. The emergence of culture in this space provides it with a mission that is paradigmatic for the human sciences: the recovery for consciousness of all those material determinations that make up man's historical unconscious. One of the problems with this analysis is that it sets up a situation in which literary production appears either as false consciousness or as a transcendental "seeing through." False consciousness means a form of representation that exists in an unreflective way, determined by a particular set of relations of production. Consequently, a lot of literature will simply be determined functionally by its role in securing the reproduction of class relations. This is the "bad" side. The "good" side is marked by moments of seeing through functional representations to the real determinations. Here we find that species of work which somehow manages to break with its determination, perhaps by belonging to what Williams calls emergent culture or to a residual culture.

(The former redeems history for consciousness by emerging in advance of its functional determination, and the latter by lagging behind.) Georg Lukács is an even clearer illustration of this position. His division of the literary field — his reconstruction of the canon into the great realists on the one hand, and his relegation of modernism on the other — is done in exactly these terms. The work of the modernists, for Lukács, reflects in a spontaneous way the current relations of production in an inverted form, whereas the great realists (such as Balzac) synthesise historical determinations to such a degree that they constitute a sort of seeing through. Here, the concept of culture returns in its Arnoldian form, as "the best which has been thought and said," even if this "best" is to appear only in the form of the proletariat's self-consciousness, restored to it at the end of the long delay of history. These works clearly are more complex than I'm indicating here; but all I want to do, for the purposes of this paper, is to identify a problem in them. In general terms, they either reduce literature to false consciousness, or restore it to its erstwhile glory as the synthetic mode. Literature is universalised either as a functionally
determined representation or as a representation that finally reflects on historical determination, thereby freeing itself from it.

In what follows I will suggest that literature or culture has no such general form. Instead, grouped under the term we find a heterogeneous set of texts, discourses, practices and institutional relations which possess no common core. The representations that emerge from this field are quite diverse and are not defined by a single general relation to "real determinations," functional or transcendental. So my object in indicating the contours of a small part of this field — nineteenth-century readings of character — is not to answer the question, "What is character?" by discovering something that underlies character and explains it. Rather, it is to describe a set of practical circumstances. These exist at the same level as character and form a surface on which it emerges, possessing neither a function nor an essence but a duration, effects and an intelligibility governed by our practical familiarity with the circumstances themselves.

Consider, then, the difference between what counts as a reading of character in the middle of the eighteenth century, and what we still recognize as one today. First, George Stubbs, writing in 1736:

We are now come to a Scene which I have always much admired. I cannot think it possible that such an Incident could have been managed better, nor more conformably to Reason and Nature. The Prince, conscious of his own good Intentions and the Justness of the Cause he undertakes to plead, speaks with that Force and Assurance which Virtue always gives; and yet manages his Expressions so as not to treat his Mother in a disrespectful Manner. . . . And his inforcing the Heinousness of his Mother's Crime with so much Vehemence, and her guilty Confessions of her Wickedness . . . are all Strokes from the Hand of a great Master in the Imitation of Nature. . . .

The Ghost's not being seen by the Queen was very proper; for we could hardly suppose that a Woman . . . could be able to bear so terrible a Sight . . .

Next, A.C. Bradley, writing in 1904:

The Queen was not a bad-hearted woman, not at all the woman to think little of murder. But she had a soft animal nature, and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy, like a sheep in the sun. . . . She never saw that drunkenness is disgusting till Hamlet told her so; and, though she knew that he considered her marriage "o'er-hasty," . . . she was untroubled by any shame at the feelings which had led to it. It was pleasant to sit upon her throne and see smiling faces round her, and foolish and unkind in Hamlet to persist in grieving for his father instead of marrying Ophelia and making everything comfortable . . . . The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is a place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humoured sensual fashion.
Now it should be fairly clear even from a first reading of the two examples that they indicate the operation of quite different techniques and operations of reading. Although both passages are concerned with the characters of Hamlet and the Queen, they are not concerned with character in the same way. In particular, the eighteenth-century critic treats character as above all an element of the scene, which is in turn treated as an organisational unit of the play. Character here is to be classified and judged according to a set of primarily rhetorical rules and norms for the proper construction of a dramatic representation. Character is not linked immediately (as it is in the second example) to the portrayal of an apparently real personality governed by universal moral norms. In the Stubbæs passage, the reading of character is the effect of the operation of a definite set of norms and rules that determine what is to count as a plausible and appropriate characterisation. The most obvious manifestation of these norms and rules in this passage is the statement of how proper it is that the Queen doesn't see the ghost of her dead husband when it appears quite near to her. This is appropriate because the eighteenth-century rules governing characterisation specify certain things which female characters should not see, say or do. Equally there are norms and rules that determine what it is appropriate and inappropriate for male characters (particularly those of a certain social rank) to say and do. So we find Stubbæs a little later in the same essay criticising the fact that Hamlet makes jokes over the corpse of someone he has just killed. This is thought to be quite inappropriate and implausible as a representation of a prince, because a jocular speech of this type in this situation is not in keeping with the rules governing the diction of a notable. Now the central point to be kept in mind is that it is not the characters of the Queen and Hamlet that are good or bad here, but rather their characterisation. That is, it is their dramatic representation, judged against certain rules and norms which are not in the first instance (or not solely) moral rules or norms applied to personality, but are instead rhetorical rules or norms governing dramatic representation.

In order to understand the function of the rules and norms governing eighteenth-century readings of character, it is necessary to see them in the context of those applied to dramatic representation as such at this time. Rather than provide an exhaustive list I will simply mention the following: rules and norms governing characterisation, and in particular the appropriate modes of speech and action for different character types; neoclassical norms governing that which can be represented directly on stage (for example, Stubbæs criticises Shakespeare for attempting to stage battles instead of having them described by minor figures, as was the case in classical drama); and finally the famous unities of time and action. So it can be said that the norms of characterisation — the rules determining unity of time and action, and the criteria for what could be represented on stage (and for how long) — are examples of techniques and operations of reading. They are not simply techniques for staging plays but are techniques for reading and judging plays. That is, the eighteenth-century rules and norms of dramatic representation form what might be called a
grid of classification and judgement. This grid determines the plausibility of a dramatic representation, and determines what (to use our terms) will count as realistic. It is from this grid that the contours of the text emerge. The grid establishes a particular form of relation to the text, such that one can say that the rules and norms of dramatic representation determine what sorts of object the text and its components are. Or equivalently, they establish in what sort of discursive space the text and its components can appear in a reading. Obviously, a philological reading of the same scene would be quite unlike Stubb's or Bradley's, and the sort of reading one might find in the high period of Scrutiny would differ again from these three. What is being suggested is that these differences in reading do not index differences in subjectivities, but rather differences in operations of reading, differences in the historical surfaces on which the content of a text can appear. It is these concepts which are indicated by a phrase such as “discursive space.” Reading here is simply another name for the activation of the rhetorical rules and norms of dramatic representation. In particular (and this is the point of the comparison) characters are read not by comparing them with so-called real personalities, but by applying the norms and rules of characterisation current at this time. Character is thus primarily a rhetorical object rather than a moral one, and appears in a space opened by a rhetoric of dramatic representation. This would seem to suggest that to read character in this manner is a historically relative and socially attributed capacity, and this fact becomes even clearer when considering the second example, with which we are much more familiar. Bradley has been chosen to exaggerate as much as possible the differences between the two readings of character. I'm not denying that a piece from, say, Johnson on Shakespeare would diminish the contrast: nonetheless, the contrast as it stands has its point.

If character in the eighteenth-century reading is primarily a rhetorical object emerging from the iteration of a set of rules/norms determining what counts as an appropriate or plausible representation, then it is possible to say that character in the nineteenth-century practice of reading is primarily a moral object. Which is to say that character in this second example appears in a space opened by a set of techniques and practices whose object is not “character as an element of a dramatic representation” but rather “character as a projection or correlate of the reader's moral self and personality.” And it is this emergence of fictional character as a projection or correlate of the reader's own moral interiority that marks the key difference here. It is possible then to repeat our earlier question: what are the techniques and practices that permit this quite different formation of the object, character? And again, a very partial list can be provided.

First, there is a particularly interesting practice of supplementing the text with a moral discourse on character-type, and this is a peculiarly nineteenth-century discourse. So we have phrases such as “soft animal nature,” the simile, “like a sheep in the sun,” and the assertion, “the belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is a place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humoured sensual fashion.” Diverging slightly, it needs to be remembered that the idea of women's
“soft natures” has a very precise set of connotations in nineteenth-century moral psychology (which theorised women’s bodies very definitely). For example, the analysis of hysteria and the treatment of hysteria in asylums were constructed in terms of the softness, the pliability, and the labile quality of the female body, which was believed to transmit sensations (particularly moral sensations) much more quickly than the male body. It was a much more ductile body in which the reason was much more quickly overwhelmed, and in which the passions were in a different relation to the will.9 Further, nineteenth-century moral psychology also constructs a typology of animals, a bestiary which ranges animals in relation to moral types. What Bradley exhibits is a capacity to draw on this set of collateral knowledges, in which character is emerging as it were parallel to literature, in another field, another set of institutions, and under another set of treatments, but still very closely connected and drawing closer together all the time. So here, “soft animal nature” constitutes a new supplementary discourse which is quite clearly different from anything to be found in Stubbess.

Secondly, we have a technique for deriving moral imperatives from the text, resulting in a common moral space for reader and character. Hence the present tense in the phrase, “she never saw that drunkenness is disgusting.” Not “was,” nor “was in the world of the play”; it simply is disgusting according to norms of conduct whose activation is part of what we call reading here. The imperative is a universal applying to the reader as well as to the Queen.

Thirdly, we have a set of operations for constructing the characters’ point of view that forms part of a technique of reader-identification with the character. The point-of-view statements are of course things not found in Shakespeare’s text: “It was pleasant to sit upon her throne and see smiling faces round her.” This is a novelistic statement brought to the reading of the play, a way of projecting the interiority of the Queen on to an introspective surface constructed in the reader. For us it goes along with what we would now call “character appreciation,” and the surface of introspection is organised by the deployment of statements in the practice of writing “character appreciations.”

What I’m indicating here is that character, under these circumstances, emerges in a quite new field and as a new object. It now appears in the space of moral interrogation and moral training. Character appears as a moral object common to the play and the reader; and I think the key change here is the emergence of nineteenth-century moral psychology, and its widespread deployment as a means of diagnosing and treating madness via an interrogation of moral character. Its appearance provides what Foucault terms an “adjacent field” opening on to the domain of the literary and providing it with models, devices, and techniques of analysis that form part of the new surface on which character appears. It should now be clear that this new reading of literary character is in fact a practice of writing, for to speak of reading here is to speak of a definite set of techniques and operations performed on the text. What we have to come to terms with is
that to read a character in late nineteenth-century criticism means to be able to go through a series of practical operations and to employ a definite set of techniques, such as: the practice of supplementing the text with elements of a moral discourse; techniques for activating moral norms common to reader and character; and the operations by which readers construct the characters' point of view as part of a technique of identification.

Now it is as a result of the practical employment of these operations that character is read as a projection or correlate of this thing I've been calling "the reader's moral self." But equally one could say that "the reader's moral self" appears in this relation as a projection or correlate of the fictional character. The two things are not happening independently of one another but occur in a dual relationship. These operations and techniques, of course, are quite radically different from the iteration of the rhetorical rules and norms which constitutes Stubb's reading of the Queen's character. The problem then becomes: how are we to understand this change in the apparatus of reading? Are we dealing with a change in the practice of reading character that is equivalent to, say, a change in the reader's point of view? Or are we confronted with a change in the practical operations and techniques whose attribution to readers changes the whole public structure of what is to count as a reading? These questions can be reformulated in the following way. Is it simply the eighteenth-century critic's point of view which prevents him from reading character as a projection/correlate of moral self or personality? That is, if the critic had looked a little more deeply into the text and read the soliloquies more closely, could this reading have become visible? The answer, I think, must be no. It is not that the eighteenth-century critic fails to see through the rhetorical analysis of characterisation to a moral reading of character. Rather, it is that the techniques and operations which link rhetorical and moral readings are not available to the eighteenth-century critic. This is to suggest that rhetorical and moral analyses of character are both going on in the eighteenth century, but they are not linked in the same way as they are in nineteenth-century cultural institutions. In other words, it is not that the eighteenth-century critic fails to see the moral reading of character; rather it is that the social apparatus which constitutes this form of looking has not yet emerged. Now if this remark is correct, then what we are dealing with is not a change in the reader's consciousness of the object "character." Instead, we are dealing with a change in the practical deployment of a public apparatus of reading, in which what is to count as character is determined. The question we have to answer, then, does not pertain to the critic's consciousness or point of view. It's not as if we could deal with these problems by saying that René Wellek or Jacques Derrida came along later and solved everything by giving us the absolute, definitive account of reading. Nor do I think we could say that an aggregate of all these readings would produce Hamlet as it existed in Shakespeare's mind. Rather, it has to do with changes in historical conditions of reading. In particular we have to ask how it became possible to treat dramatic
characterisation as a systematic projection or correlate of the audience's or the reader's moral character.

Crudely speaking, in the early eighteenth century the judging of dramatic characterisation and the constitution and interrogation of a personal moral self are carried out in quite different social institutions. The former is carried out by the apparatus of neoclassical criticism embodied in the academy, and more importantly in the salons; whereas the latter is overwhelmingly organised by the churches, and these two things are quite distinct. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, then, the techniques of interrogation and confession which construct a moral self are still closely connected to church ritual and are not an important factor in drama criticism. In The History of Sexuality Foucault describes a process of secularisation of techniques of moral interrogation and confession. He argues that these techniques are freed from their singular attachment to the church and to church ritual, and start to appear in a very wide variety of apparatuses and institutions: in the keeping of diaries; in the apparatus of self-interrogation and the formation of conscience characteristic of puritanism; in the first modern forms of biography and autobiography; and in secular practices of counselling and interviewing, found increasingly in the secular domain, and in educational institutions in particular. I'm suggesting that we can begin to see the way in which rhetorical analysis and the formation of moral selves begin to form a common field, if we follow the detachment of the forms of production of moral authorities from the church and their re-emergence in a range of new apparatuses — including moral psychology and literary analysis — whose object is the production of knowledge via disciplinary individuation. It is in this context that I want to suggest that the emergence of an apparatus of popular education in the nineteenth century is what finally establishes the technical connection between the rhetorical analysis of characterisation and the machinery for the construction of moral selves or good personal character.

Returning to the three operations by which I've characterised the nineteenth-century reading of character, it is in fact the apparatus of popular education which first of all provides for the dissemination of popular moral texts used as supplements in literary reading. Secondly, popular education also establishes the systematic conditions under which children form moral imperatives from the reading of fictional texts. Just to show how persistent these processes are, here is a quotation from the current Grade Eleven Queensland English syllabus, which provides this instruction for teachers:

Shakespeare's Macbeth is to be studied as an example of the dramatic representation of the wrong doer finding himself divorced from any satisfaction for his crimes committed and eventually meeting an untimely end.

Thirdly, and finally, the apparatus of popular education establishes the systematic means and techniques through which students identify with a
character on a common moral terrain. These techniques are established in
the form of systematically repeated and assessable exercises. Again, here is
an example from the same Grade Eleven English syllabus:

Consider the hero’s actions related to the wills of other characters.
Do you believe in the rightness of the hero’s beliefs? Is he then a
moral hero? Choose at least two incidents that will illustrate heroic
qualities of the hero. Use these as the basis of a short character
sketch etc.

This indicates the way novels and plays continue to be used in secondary
schools. It is still the primary way in which character is constructed and
read for us, and it is not an accident or an aberration, nor is it an
ideological distortion of a more fundamental capacity for self-
understanding. It’s simply the case that for us the use of literary texts has
become historically connected to forming the moral character of children
and adults. (This is something that will still need to be done in a socialist
society: a socialist society won’t make people good by lifting the yoke of
property relations from them.) I’m not automatically opposed to this set of
procedures; all I’m trying to do is describe the phenomenon, and show
some of its determinations on what the object “character” is for us. I’m
suggesting that it is in this manner, in this institution and through these
forms that those practical techniques and operations which are
constitutive of character-reading are transformed, and permit the
systematic connection of the rhetorical and the moral in a new way. What
I’m pointing to here is not a change in the reader’s consciousness of the
object “character,” but instead the emergence of a new public apparatus in
which a new practical capacity for reading character is attributed to social
agents. This apparatus consists of the sort of operations and techniques
already listed in this paper, together with the institutional means by which
their practical repetition is secured in the training of children and
secondary and tertiary students. The important point to keep in mind here
is that, in the modern apparatus of character-reading, it is not only the
fictional character that is formed, but also the moral character of the
student. That is, in investigating changes in reading practices, we are not
dealing with the level of the psychical or the subjective, but with the level of
the political and the public. We are dealing with the emergence of public
institutions which are quite as public and material as, say, insurance
institutions (though obviously they exist in a different sphere with different
effects). We are dealing not at all with psychical-subjective objects but with
public-political ones which are focused in certain kinds of social policy and
institutions. In particular, the modern apparatus of character-reading is
distinguished by its utilisation of textual analysis in a systematic regime of
moral training. At the level of social policy, the apparatus of nineteenth-
century popular education is argued for precisely in terms of the need to
combat criminality, political dissent and pauperism by forming a sober,
moral population via the new apparatus of popular education. It emerges
precisely in the domain of policy relating to the population as a whole — to
its moral, physiological well-being (these things weren’t particularly
discriminated at the time).
Reading Character

To conclude, why shouldn't what has been indicated in this paper be treated as a contextualist explanation of the same sort as is offered by analyses within the field of Cultural Studies? In answering this question, it is not so much a matter of wanting to detach oneself completely from any relation to Cultural Studies analyses, but merely to distance oneself from some problems produced within that paradigm. In brief I am operating with a quite different concept of determination. First, in the account I am providing there is no equivalent of an author or a class-subject which can function like an author by transmitting historical changes in social relations to the structure of the text. In one sense the structure of the text is simply one factor along with a series of others. In the case of nineteenth-century readings of character we are dealing with the emergence of a new type of discursive object. But this new discursive object has no singular point of inscription, no singular appearance as a new use of language, comparable with Raymond Williams' isolation of the Shakespearian soliloquy as the linguistic inscription of a new set of social relations and the individual consciousness that accompanies them. Although I'm suggesting that the new moral object of character emerges in a particular discursive domain, it is not the domain of any particular text or use of language. Rather I think the text of Shakespeare takes its place in a larger organisation of statements, techniques, perceptual organisations and institutional relations that constitute a new space in which character appears. This change can be thought of as an effect of the new organisation of statements, techniques, and so on. The organisation is public and has the status of an apparatus; consequently it is not a good candidate for functioning as the vehicle of authorship or class-experience. At the same time it is, in a sense, an organisation of statements or a means for their reproduction; so it doesn't have the status of a historical "real" lying behind discourse in the form of, say, purely economic relations. This enables me to draw a second distinction. Determination in this account — as opposed to the contextualist account — is not pictured as having a singular form in which the domain of representation is determined by the domain of the real (for example, by changes in the forms and relations of economic or cultural production). There are two reasons for this. First, representations are themselves thought of as real, in the sense of being non-expressive of consciousness, and of involving simply the practical deployment of certain material forms, devices, techniques, modes of statement, and so on. Secondly (and equally) a representation or an organisation of statements is constrained and transformed by its relation to other historical elements. But these elements might themselves simply be other representations; they need not be essentially and always changes in the economy or changes in the relations of production. They might be changes in the deployment of other types of statement (that is, the emergence of new adjacent fields). And it seems to me that the key determining element of the emergence of the Bradley-type analysis is the emergence of the new adjacent field of moral psychology. This is what provides a new ensemble of techniques, institutions and practices in which "character" is rigorously reconstructed, either in a fully clinical sense, or in
a wider sense in which moral psychology becomes a way of training children, of understanding them in the home and in school and in a whole series of other disciplinary domains. One finds a very wide set of mechanisms for the formation of character. (The scouting movement, for example, is shot through with these means for analysing, interrogating and reconstructing the character of children, such as securing the child's repetition of a certain mode of self-interrogation at a certain time of the day.) The reading of literary works is inserted into this very ramified, dispersed organisation in a particular way — for example, the appearances of Shakespeare's characters in books of exemplary characters, where real characters like Galileo and Bruno are found alongside Macbeth and Hamlet. In these moral texts they are all characters, all illustrating the same moral universe in a certain way. This is made possible by the formation of disciplinary apparatuses, and is certainly a question of determination; but the determination is not homogeneous and is not always working from the zone of the economic to the domain of consciousness. So the rhetorical analysis, in this set of circumstances, moves into an adjacent relation to a group of discourses and techniques involved in the moral analysis of character. What is being suggested here rather roughly is that this new relation between discursive apparatuses is crucial in the emergence of nineteenth-century literary analyses of character. Now clearly a system of constraints and determinations is at stake here. It is the object of analysis, but it has the status of a variable network, and it is not reducible to a single philosophical model of the real determining the discursive.

Thirdly, and finally, it seems true to say that the determinations bearing on the emergence of nineteenth-century character analysis are political in a certain sense, but this doesn't mean that the domain of the political is the real or is itself reducible to an economic reality. To speak of the political character of the determinations is to speak of the effects of particular social policies. The formation of popular schools — in which rhetorical analyses of texts and the moral formation of the student are systematically related — is the result of a particular set of social policies; and these are formulated, argued about and form a major question in the early part of the nineteenth century. Of course, social policies themselves mobilise particular discourses or means of representation, and the crucial discourses in this instance were those of the susceptibility or moral vulnerability of the poor and the "lower orders" generally. The discourses at work in this domain of policy formulation in relation to education include a eugenic discourse, a discourse on the genetic quality of the populace thought through in terms of a breeding stock liable to degeneration. Furthermore, there are the early psychological discourses on character traits, on psychological differences between the sexes, typologies based on animal likenesses, and the role of physiognomy and cranieology in the reading of character both inside explicitly psychological institutions and also more generally. So what one encounters are forms of inspection for signs of moral weakness that were very widely used, for example in analysing delinquency and criminality in large urban populations, particularly in schools and in apparatuses of training and correction.
Reading Character

It's possible to conclude then that social policy, far from being an irreducibly real domain, is itself organised discursively and depends on these definite means to calculate what it is about the poor that makes them volatile, and why the poor at this point should become the object of political action on a vast scale. In other words, political initiatives aimed at a segment of the population are not reducible to the demands of economic relations expressed through the interests of capitalists. (Although the interests of capitalists certainly are at stake here, arguably more than their interests are at stake.) Rather, social policy is formulated and organised by relations between available discourses. Clearly, to say this is to shift the usual meaning of the word "discourse," since it no longer means a representation of the real but rather refers to deployments of statements, perceptual technologies, regulated activities, institutional relations and so on. So it's not a case of having a nineteenth-century discourse on character analysis and then looking around for its determining economic-historical context as the means of explaining it. To speak of the nineteenth-century discourse of character analysis is to speak of an ensemble of statements, techniques, institutions and forms of social relation. Clearly this ensemble also has economic conditions, such as the growth of cities and the emergence of a consolidated urban poor as a result of secondary industrialisation. But these conditions only provide a field for social policy. They do not explain it.

DISCUSSION

Question: I wonder if your picture of the nineteenth century would have to be modified considerably if you took account of some of the highly subversive fiction of the period (for example, Dostoevsky's novels), in which the reader's construction of character involves finding satisfaction in alienation from society, together with the need for society. It's a very ambivalent conception of character. It seems extremely difficult to assimilate it into your model of social institutions using literature to produce desirable social types or to reform the poor.

Hunter: There are a couple of answers to that. The obvious answer is to say that not all literature is ever deemed suitable for use in the way I've indicated. Even in the case of Shakespeare, rigorous discriminations are made concerning which plays are suitable at various levels of schooling. My second point is that when I use the phrase "moral character" or "moral interiority" I do not mean "good." Any kind of interiority, if it's produced out of certain forms of introspection, is a moral interiority. Obviously an existentialist hero is as much the result of the construction of a certain type of interior. In fact the existential hero is unimaginable without a dislocation between interior and exterior; the whole point of the genre is to elaborate that dislocation. So the double-barreled answer, in short, is to say yes, a lot of things wouldn't be deemed suitable for use in schools; but the general mechanism, arguably, would still produce the conditions for those "unsuitable" texts to be read and written elsewhere.
What I’m not clear about is how your concentration on character in
the nineteenth century fits in with earlier treatments of character. For
example, Theophrastus wrote descriptions of moral types which had some
connection with characters made use of in Greek theatre. And this making
of characters became a major activity from the seventeenth century right
up to Boswell. The seventeenth century also was a time in which a shift
occurred from thinking in rhetorical terms to thinking in terms of people’s
sentimental reactions to events. For example when Dryden rewrites
Aristotle’s definition of the play he says things like, “We watch the
movements of their minds” — “their” referring to the characters, the stress
is now on how people react to what happens to them; a play is defined in
those terms rather than in terms of what things happen.

There is a long and a short answer to your question. One could begin
to elaborate the various histories of the formation of character, which would
include the relation of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writing to
the theory of the humours, dominant humours as character traits, and so
on. One could look at the very different use of drama and moral training in
pre-Shakespearean drama, which is fully integrated into church ritual but
in a way quite unlike the form of integration we find in the nineteenth
century, where it has taken over the function of the Church as a sort of
moral regulator. So it’s not a question of setting up an absolute distinction
between the rhetorical and the moral, but of indicating that the terms of
their relation vary quite markedly at different points. But I would still
argue that the type of criticism of Shakespeare produced in the seventeenth
and eighteenth centuries (though there isn’t much until the end of the
seventeenth century) is very different from the kind found in Bradley, and
one needs to account for this difference. Broadly speaking, the question of
the morality of characters is mediated through the question of a morality
of the writer of the play as someone who conforms (or doesn’t) to a
particular set of rules and norms. But there is a history to be written which
would produce a much finer set of differentiations than anything
contained in my paper. For example, The Second Shepherd’s Play is a
form of drama very closely connected to the moral-spiritual well-being of
people, but its form of connection doesn’t actually involve the production
of individual consciences. It’s a form of drama related to Roman Catholic
ritual, which is collective by contrast with the Puritan way of setting up the
individual conscience, the interior of the individual.

One way into this might be to look at different practices in the
confessional, in order to establish whether the nineteenth-century
confessional concentrated more than earlier ages on the formation of
moral character rather than on questions about this or that act.

Why would those practices necessarily be distinct? Foucault argues
that the main changes occurred in the Renaissance, when the demand for
weekly confession really got going, and the forms of inspecting oneself for
traces of “sins of the flesh” were quite new (it became possible, for example,
to sin solely by thought, whereas earlier one had to break canon law — by
committing adultery, for instance — to be a sinner). Then there’s the issue
Reading Character

of the dissemination of these forms of self-interrogation (confessions, the keeping of diaries, and so on) in relation to the setting up of a moral conscience. So there develops a new form of establishing the conditions for good conduct in a populace, conditions which already exist outside the church as a monolithic and ritualistic place for securing good conduct, and now exist in Puritan sects whose members set up their own conscience through these forms. That is the key thing. It provides a way of saying that the relation of drama to the formation of moral conduct is very different in these two periods. But I am speculating here.

It seems to me that in so far as you rely on different pieces of discourse for getting at all of this, there might be something to be said for spending more time on the stylistic differences between those discourses. For instance, differences in genre. One of your texts is an essay which points to essentialistic features of the characters in the play and tries to describe them normatively in terms of certain absolutes shared by an inner circle of people who know exactly what Reason and Nature are. The writing has a degree of assurance relating to that particular community. By contrast the Bradley passage is written by someone who (as they say) had read Victorian fiction as well as Shakespeare, and who is concerned to rewrite the Shakespearean play as a sort of Victorian novel, complete with authorial intrusions to explain what's going on. In both cases a different generic "lens" is interposed between the writer and the material; so perhaps you need to take account of these rhetorical differences.

To some extent I agree, but I wouldn't want to draw too strong a distinction between Bradley's rewriting and whatever it is that Stubbs is doing. They are both rewriting: all criticism is a rewriting. The question of the generic means has to be thought of in that way. It's interesting to note that when Stubbs writes about Shakespeare it's not in the context of anything that we would recognise as literary analysis. It is "essayism," and side-by-side with this would be a piece on Plato's Republic or an essay on the Church. It's the genre of learned essays collected under a heading that is not "literature" in our sense.

I'm interested in practices of reading contemporary fiction where there is little interiority in the characters and little narrative depth. It seems to me that moral readings of character would be frustrated by this kind of writing. How would you fit your account to the reading of post-existentialist kinds of fiction (for example, from Robbe-Grillet and Beckett onwards)?

Obviously it requires a very different type of reading.

Would there be a shift in the paradigm of reading?

Yes. On the one hand they're exactly the kinds of novel (or film) which don't get used in schools very much. Or when they are used (as Brecht is) it's always only to recuperate the characters for a realist reading.

So basically you're arguing that the dominant form of reading remains a moral reading?
In secondary schools, yes. For those other texts it's a question of how the morality is reconstructed in other forms — for example, the notion of the "radicalism" of shallowness and the superficial: the way in which Andy Warhol can still function as Art is by a process of saying that the shallower we get (with Pop) the further we get from the didactic. It's a different way of escaping the didactic, but the common enemy in both cases is didactic writing, since Shakespeare avoids didacticism by the richness of characterisation, by the fact that his writing denies any schematic reduction or instrumental determination. On the other hand, the post-existentialist and structuralist writing (the New Novel, Pop-ism) remains anti-didactic, only now it's the radicalism-of-surfaces thesis, as in Susan Sontag's writing (Against Interpretation, Styles of Radical Will), which lumps Warhol and Godard together because both avoid the determination of experience by ideas. "The moral" can be shown to reappear as a transcendental category, and quite independently of the concept of character.

To take up the point of "adjacent fields": in recent fictional treatments, "character" is given in a statistical sense. In Last Exit to Brooklyn, for example, people behave in precisely the way you would expect them to do in this sort of urban environment. There is no interiority, no moral locus: characters seem to be chosen for the way they reveal statistical types. Might the rise of statistical science aid the production of a new kind of reading?

I doubt whether it would by itself. The missing part of your comment is how Selby's or Burroughs' work is used. You could use Burroughs in a seminar to show how terrible life is elsewhere, and give him a very moral reading. But the more important answer is, yes, there are new fields adjacent to literature, and they can best be approached by seeing what problems the reading of Burroughs and Pynchon would pose, say, for a reader who is not in a department of English, or someone trained in reading character from traditional narrative. They don’t automatically make sense as books lacking depth, fragmented, drained of character motivation, and so on. People might say it’s a lot of rubbish, and in a sense they are not wrong: they are indicating the absence of the conditions for reading the object. The interesting thing here is that a lot of modern literature is inseparable from a theoretical environment and unintelligible without it, like objets trouvés, which are the extreme form of this phenomenon. And this suggests a way of recasting your question. For us now, phenomenology is the adjacent field for post-representational aesthetic works. One can't understand John Cage or a lot of the texts we're talking about without at least some domestication of phenomenology. Take the idea of chance, the aleatory, a key phenomenological conception, the notion that only the unexpected escapes determination. This offers a new way of constructing musical works, through tape-loops and unforeseen interventions from the electronic medium itself, or Cage's compositional algorithms, which mean one can never reproduce the same work in the same form. Now to someone who knows only Schubert this is quite revolting stuff, impossible to listen to. It can be intelligible, of course,
but the conditions of its intelligibility are very narrow. Pynchon would be
an intermediate case because there one has vestiges of character. On the
other hand there is Brecht, who is completely disconnected from this whole
development, and who moves character in a different direction, wanting to
retain it much more than any of the new New Novel people because he
thinks that its historical loading is not to be undone by phenomenology or
deconstructionism or any other such thing, but undone only when the
historical relations are undone. One could give a typology of the forms in
which moral analysis is carried on currently in literature, and which has
nothing whatsoever to do with character, but a lot to do with other types of
fields.

Where would your analysis stop? How large can the preparatory work
be?

It would depend what you were looking at. If you’re looking at A.C.
Bradley, then the Freud/Jones reading of Hamlet clearly is not going to be
pertinent. It depends on how you set up the problem and for what
purposes. I don’t think the object of any analysis is an exhaustive
description. Exhaustive descriptions have been the object of logic and of
natural history (in its eighteenth-century form) and then of certain kinds of
New Criticism, where it seemed that Empson would have said everything
you could possibly say about two lines of an Arthur Waley translation of a
Chinese poem. (I think he probably did say everything, where “everything
you could possibly say” would be what was producible as reconstructed
philological analysis.) But the point of my work is not to give an exhaustive
analysis of a text; so where you stop is really a much more tactical question.
You stop when you’ve arranged enough material in relation to (say) the
question of what it is that permits Bradley to use a phrase like “soft animal
nature,” or how it is that “softness,” “animality” and “nature” can form a
phrase. And I think it is possible to give a definite answer to that.

I’m trying to relate your comments to Gadamer’s work. What, in your
account, is the relation between a reading of a text and the ensemble of
techniques which make particular readings possible?

Loosely, the reading is what is produced by that apparatus; it’s a
relation of production. The Gadamer position, and all phenomenological
hermeneutics which operate with a conception of openness to the world (as
in, say, the work of Paul Ricoeur on interpretation), see this as a problem
of open and closed structures. So does a lot of deconstructionist work,
whereby the “radical,” the “new” is that which disrupts closed structures.
My work has nothing at all to do with that. I don’t think the open/closed
notion of structure is an exhaustive or even a pertinent analysis. Changes
occur independently of “openness to the world,” and “the world” as a
category constitutes a problem. “The world” in its current forms in literary
criticism (and here I’m thinking of the work of Wolfgang Iser and Stanley
Fish) is generally that which one glimpses in an unsuspected moment. But
clearly one can talk about the production of “surprising moments,”
moments which are producible in quite straightforward ways (for
example, the mechanisms of composition used by John Cage). That is to
say, I don’t think “surprise” guarantees openness to anything, nor do I think that these ensembles — these discursive structures I’ve been talking about — actually close off experience, because I don’t think they are in any relation to anything one would call “experience.” I don’t think there is a problem of how to “avoid structure” or “get around the lens intervening between one” and “the work,” because “the work” is that which appears as the result of a certain set of practical operations. Now clearly those operations change (and I’ve tried to indicate some changes), but I don’t think character-analysis is in a phase of decline or demise simply because Robbe-Grillet looked around a structure and, in a surprising moment, saw “the flux of the real.” I think Robbe-Grillet simply wrote novels which we are prepared to call “indexes of the flux of the real.” Those changes are brought about probably by changes in the adjacent field and the uses of literary texts at certain levels.

Perhaps I could summarise my work here by saying that I’m not trying to provide a general theory of signification or the formation of the subject. What I’m doing is assembling reminders of how we call “moral interiors” are formed at particular times. The question of “the surface of the text,” for instance, is neither here nor there. That could be as much the object of orthography or phonetics or a history of graphics. I don’t want to say “this is what Hamlet means.” I want to ask a different question, namely, “What are the circumstances in which Hamlet could have this type of meaning?” And “this type of meaning” is neither more nor less privileged to me than all sorts of other types — such as philological analysis — which were available at the time, and were being used and exploited.

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Transcript of a seminar given in the English Department of the University of Adelaide on 27 September 1982.

2 Raymond Williams, Culture (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1981).
8 In this practice of reading, represented by L.C. Knight’s “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” (Explorations [London: Chatto and Windus, 1944], pp.1-39), we find the
intelligibility of characters emerging from a poetic analysis of the language of their speeches. This constitutes an apparatus in which the character appears in the same space of judgement as the author of the poem, in so far as his sincerity, lack of commitment, and so on, are read off from a grid which locates these qualities in the originators of the texts. So a character as the originator of a speech is put in the same place as the authorial originator of a poem or play.

11 Queensland State Government Education Department, *English for Grade Eleven*, unpaginated.
13 Williams, *Culture*, Ch. 6.