Here are two points about characterization. Both, however, grow from a particular concept of story. A story is ultimately not what happens in the writer’s mind that makes her or him write down a series of words (that is the just discussed “story process”). Rather, it is what a given series of words causes to happen in the reader’s. And I might mention a minor corollary: it is only by seriously examining the things we can’t make happen in the reader’s mind that we begin to gain fine control over what we can. For example, there is no way, with words, to make a reader see the color red, but we can make the reader remember the color . . . In short, the experience of a story is a mental phenomenon of the order of memory, not immediate sensory apprehension, and an analysis of why some memories are more vivid, pressing, or moving than others is much more likely to lead to a vivid, pressing, and moving story than all the accurately reported first-hand experience in the world. A story is of the order of memory, and that is why it takes place in the past, even when set in the future. A story is a maneuvering of myriad micromemories into a new order.

It was the red of bricks.
It was the red of an Irish setter.
It was the red of Hawaiian Punch.
It was the red of smeared cherry pulp.

The point is, of course, all these are different reds. We remember them all differently.

But characterization?
My first point has to do with psychological veracity.
Any two facts clustered around a single pronoun begin to generate a character in the reader’s mind:

She was sixteen years old, and already five-foot eleven.
Though only a ghost, she is already more or less vivid depending on the reader’s experience. As soon as we get ready to add a third fact, however, we encounter the problem of psychological veracity. All subsequent information about our character (let’s call her Sam) has to be more or less congruent with what already exists in the gap between these two facts. I have no particular problem if I continue adding facts thus:

She was a shy girl, and tended to walk around with her shoulders hunched.

The character, remember, is in our minds, not on the paper. She is composed of what we have seen or what we have read, which in this case has to do with what we know about the height of most sixteen-year-olds, as well as the general behavior of adolescent girls who are different from their peers.

If I wanted to, instead of making Sam shy and stooped, I could have said:

Lively, self-assured, she was cuttingly witty, though always popular; active physically, though always gentle.

If I did, however, in order to compensate for the tension that forms immediately with our sense of psychological veracity, I would have had to add (with an implied “For you see . . .”):

She was the middle child of seven, with siblings taller than herself on either side. It was a close and boisterous family, so that when Sam first came to Halifax High her stubby classmates amused her, and she was big-hearted enough to try to amuse them back. That and her basketball prowess made her very popular.

But if I had made her shy and stooped, I would not have needed the above. In the same way that the physically unusual needs explanation, so does the psychologically unusual. Practically any combination of physical and psychological traits can exist beneath a single persona: but the writer’s instinctive feel for psychological veracity has to determine which combinations need further elucidation to cement their juxtaposition, and which simply work by themselves to generate a character, without further embellishment. All too often the plot simply calls
for someone near six feet (because she has to be able to see over Mr. Green’s fence when Henry runs out the French windows), sixteen years old (so that she isn’t allowed in the movie house, where Green is the day manager Tuesday mornings), and self-assured (so she can calm down the people who rush out into the lobby on Saturday night when Henry shoots the blank air gun . . .), and so on.

But if the writer has violated the reader’s sense of psychological veracity, he will have a fine and exciting tale moving around a Sam-shaped hole . . . even if the character in the writer’s mind is quite real.

Ideally, all the plot information should contribute to the realization of the characters. All the character information should move the plot: if we need that sprawling, emotionally supportive family to make Sam real, it would be a good idea to have them take part in the story as well (Henry is Sam’s oldest brother, who is living on the other side of town and doesn’t get along with his parents at all; let us look a little more closely at Sam’s happy family, and at Sam’s apparent self-assuredness . . .). But this is how short stories turn into novels: this is what writers mean when they say characters can run away with the story.

My second point about characterization appears rather paradoxical in light of the first. Once a reader catches, by his or her own sense of psychological veracity, the character from what generates between the facts scattered about a name, vividness and immediacy are maintained, essentially, through what the character does: her actions (and particularly that subgroup of actions prompted by things outside her: reactions).

A character in a novel of mine—that most dangerous of creations: a novelist writing a novel—observed that there were three types of actions: purposeful, habitual, and gratuitous. If the writer can show a character involved in a number of all three types of actions, the character will probably seem more real.

This occurred to me when I was trying to analyze why some writers who can present perfectly well-drawn males cannot present a convincing female to save themselves—heroines or villainesses. I noticed with these writers that while their heroes (and villains) happily indulge in all types of actions, if there is a villainess, she is generally all purpose; if there is a heroine, she
often does nothing but habitual actions, or nothing but gratuitous ones.

Assuming one has one’s characters clearly visualized, the writer has to expose them to enough different things so that the characters can react in her or his own ways.

Often, in the rush to keep the action going, writers who specialize in what are seen as adventure stories forget to confront their characters (especially the women) with enough objects/emotions/situations or give their characters space enough to react in a way both individual and within the limits of psychological veracity.

Ten years ago, before I had had any novels published, as a rule of thumb I constructed a small list of things that I thought all major characters in a novel should be exposed to and allowed to have individual reactions to, to make them appear particularly vivid.

Food: How does the character behave when eating with a group? If possible, how does she or he react when supplying food for others?
Sleep: What particularizes his/her going to sleep, his/her waking up?
Money: How does he or she get his/her shelter, food, and how does she or he feel about how she or he gets it?
Society: How does he or she react to somebody who makes substantially more money than he or she does, and how is this different from the way he or she acts to an economic peer (and believe me, it is different, however admirable)?

How does she or he react when she or he meets somebody who makes substantially less money than he or she does (and ditto)?

In a short story, of course, one may not have time to explore all these particular aspects of this character. But I can’t think of one great novelist, from Madame de Lafayette (La Princesse de Clèves [1678]) through Joyce (Ulysses [1922]), who does not particularize her or his characters through at least some of these situations, somewhere or other through their books.
Now one can take the “list method” of character development and run it into the ground. When I was seventeen, a writer of successful juvenile novels gave me an eight-page mimeographed form he claimed he used to help him construct characters. In proper Harvard outline form were questions like:

1. How does he react outdoors?
   A. To weather?
      1. To rain?
      2. To sleet?
      3. To sun?
   B. To geography?
      1. In the mountains?
      2. By the sea?

II. How does he react indoors . . . ?

As an experiment, I took a character in a story I was working on (a skindiver, I remember, who had come with an American team to work on underwater oil wells off the coast of Venezuela) and wrote out nineteen pages of “characterization,” following the guide.

Needless to say, I lost all interest in completing the story.

Leaving my particular points to generalize a bit:

The confusion in following most sorts of literary advice usually comes from the author’s confusion as to what is happening in the author’s mind and what he can effect in the reader’s.

I don’t think the writer has to understand the characters to write about them. The writer does need to see them. The reader, however, does need to understand them; if the reader figures them out for herself, the writer has “created” all that more vivid a character than if the writer explained them away. The writer must see and put down those things that will allow (not make: you can’t make the reader do anything—not even open the book) the reader to understand. If you can (figuratively) close your eyes and see Sam as sixteen, six feet tall, and heroically self-assured, fine. But you will have to pay more attention to the vision of the story than certainly most adventure plots allow for.

The juxtapositions of traits that make up a “hero” are, alas,
comparatively rare. That is why a “heroic” hero needs a good deal of characterization if our sense of psychological veracity is not to be strained past the breaking point very fast—precisely because she is a psychological (as well as a statistical) anomaly.

I don’t think a writer’s understanding is going to hurt the writer’s (or should I say, the reader’s) characters, in and of itself. However, what we understand with exhaustive analytical thoroughness we are not too likely to be interested in enough to fictionalize about with intensity—since the actual fictionalizing process itself is a form of synthetic analysis.

The thing to remember about characterization—direct characterization, in which you write about a person’s psychology and the specific things which have shaped it to its particular form—is that, in most stories, a little goes a long way. As Oscar Wilde noted more than a hundred years ago, the more characterization you have, the more your character comes to sound like everybody else. Therefore what most writers want (Proust, Henry James, and Robert Musil notwithstanding) is a little very telling characterization, rather than lots of very precise characterization.

It is intriguing that the writer of the past hundred years to discuss most systematically what goes on in the writer’s mind when creating was the French poet Paul Valéry, and that he produced an amazingly hard-headed aesthetic in which the words “precision” and “scientific” appear over and over. He himself began as an engineer. Mathematics and engineering supply most of his nonliterary specimens of the creative process.

A poet, his particular concern was poetry. But much of the impetus behind fiction is close to the poetic impulse. In an essay on La Fontaine’s _Adonis_, he says in passing: “Follow the path of your aroused thought, and you will soon meet this infernal inscription: _There is nothing so beautiful as that which does not exist._”

Whether she is writing about what she thinks could, should, or might someday exist or might have once existed, or whether he is dallying with some future fantasia so far away all subjunctive connection with the here and now is severed or is writing about the most nitty-gritty of recognizable landscapes, the writer has
still become entranced with and dedicated her- or himself to the realization of what is not. And all the “socially beneficial functions of art” are minimal before this aesthetic one: it allows the present meaning; it allows the future to exist.

—San Francisco
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