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Character: A Concept That Does Not Stand Still

1. In a text published in 1976, Amélie Rorty wrote: "The concept of a person is not a concept that stands still, hospitably awaiting an analysis of its necessary and sufficient conditions" (Rorty 301). I quote these words from the "literary postscript" of the volume *The Identities of Persons* (1991), edited by Rorty, in order to point out their interest for a field of study which, at first sight, would seem to have only tenuous connections with theory of character. The field in question is that which deals with philosophy of mind, emotion work, and the mind-body relationship.

However, it was that brief reference to the concept of character as a dynamic entity that served as the starting point for Rita Felski in her introduction to issue no. 42 of the journal *New Literary History* (2011): "Riffing off an observation by Amélie Rorty, we could say that the concept of character is not a concept that stands still" (Felski V). The context in which Felski's words appear should be taken into account. This was the introduction to a special issue of *New Literary History* devoted entirely to the question of character. That introduction confirms the theoretical and epistemological "resurrection" of an area of study that was apparently exhausted, namely that of character: "In the last decade, however, we have seen the sudden revitalization of a once moribund field" (Felski V). Finally, the parallel between the person (in Rorty) and the fictional character (according to Felski) enables two distinct trajectories: one leading from person to character, and the other going in the opposite direction, from character to person. In short: "People inside and outside works of art" (Felski VI). Or in other words: characters don't stand still.

I am not going to follow here the route proposed by that important issue of *New Literary History.* I would, however, like to stress its significance in the light of how narrative studies have developed in the last twenty years. What is more, there is no analysis in it that comes at all close to what is important right now: understanding the extent to which digital technologies and networking have resulted in the reconfiguration of a category—character—which had for centuries been content to stay put in the place that had been allocated to it by narrative. It is also important to observe that reconfiguration with the proper historical perspective, so as to identify some precursors or (if I may put it like this) "founding characters."

The final words of Felski's text seem promising in the sense that they announce something new: "No doubt, a certain conception of what constitutes character—an idea of unified, unchanging, intrinsic, or impermeable person-

hood—is no longer sustainable on theoretical or historical grounds" (Felski IX). For me, that implicit promise of a *new world* in which character has to be reanimated raises a challenge, one with both a theoretical dimension and an analytic potential; and I shall respond to it in function of a major personal research project whose beginning I can locate but whose end is not in sight.[1] From this project, I will develop certain emblematic texts and several suggestions of analysis. What I read into this research project is a specific route: from a conception of character as a static narrative element, I arrive at its "reconstruction" as a dynamic, unstable, even evanescent category. In short, as I suggest in my title (directly imported from Felski and indirectly from Amélie Rorty), character is "a concept that does not stand still."

2. In 1874, the great Portuguese novelist Eça de Queiroz published his first consistent and ambitious tale involving the conditioning of character and the narrative work that this entails. It is a short story of some considerable length, entitled, in its English translation, "The Idiosyncrasies of a Young Blonde Woman" (2009), a title which already tells us something, for, as suggested here, the story centers upon a character that is unusual, or rather, somewhat strange. In a second-hand account, because it is told by someone that heard it and reproduces what he was told, we hear about an unfortunate amorous incident in which a young man, honest and hardworking, falls in love with a "blonde woman," who turns out to be a kleptomaniac. The story, as we might expect, does not end well, and Macário, the protagonist, realizing his fiancée's predilection for stealing, decides to expel her from his life: "'Go!' And moving closer to her he said: 'You're a thief!'" (Queiroz 138).

Everything in the short story rings true if we take into account the aesthetic and ethical framework of realism that the young Eça had begun to adopt as his literary project: the characters are clear-cut and their values well defined, determining behaviors and producing consequences that cannot be avoided. As if wishing to underline the principle of how character is stable and predictable, Eça offers a description, right at the beginning, which, for me, is exemplary. The narrator, having arrived at a small provincial hotel and climbed to his room, sees what is described in the text as follows:

> Room number 3 was at the far end of the corridor. Outside the doors on either side the travelers had placed their shoes to be cleaned: there were heavy riding boots all covered in mud, complete with spurs and chains; the white shoes of a hunter; the tall, red boots of a landowner; the high boots of a priest, with their silk tassels; the battered calf-leather ankle boots of a student; and, outside one of the doors, number 15, a pair of women's boots, tiny and slender, with beside them

the even tinier lace-up boots of a child, all scuffed and worn, the un-laced legs of the kid boots flopped over to one side. Everyone was asleep. (Queiroz 120)

There are two discursive procedures combined here, pointing in a clear direction. First: the way the guests' shoes and boots are described in itself reveals a great deal about the social, cultural and professional aspects of these characters, who are fixed in stable roles. In some cases, these roles are very close to what we call social types: a priest, a student, a hunter, a landowner, etc. Second: they are objects of a certain nature which, through a process of metonymy, announce the characters that are associated with them. In short: tell me what kind of shoes you wear and I will tell you who you are—to the extent that we don't need to actually see them. We let them sleep in peace, because the principle of predictability has been confirmed, establishing a security regulation that protects the reader against surprises and the effort of unpredictable reading. In other words: the conventional realist character does not stray beyond the framework of behaviors attributed to it for the comfort of a reader that is passive and perhaps even a little lazy.

3. Curiously, the figure that I have called (in a deliberately reductive manner) the realist character may actually be considered a regressive feature. To prove this, I shall compare it with narrative and fictional antecedents which, earlier in the 19th century, had proposed a dynamic, and to all effects more modern concept of character. Here, I am referring to certain key aesthetic and philosophical concepts deriving directly from the Romantic worldview, according to which textual practices and the figuration of characters were governed by the values of instability and change.

The aesthetic of the fragment, understood as "the Romantic genre *par excellence*" according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, already foreshadows a freeing-up of language that the digital tools and electronic composition would later make fully effective. The Romantic fragment brings with it "the relative unfinishing," "the variety and mixture of objects that could be treated by a single collection of parts." Thus, "the unity of the whole" comes to be "constituted somehow outside the work, in the subject that is revealed in it or in the judgement that enables its maxims" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 58).

The Romantic character is similarly configured. In its nature, its social and moral attitudes, its reactions to life and to other men, it is a sign of permanent instability. The portrait that is drawn of it, or which one might hope to draw of it, has difficulty in defining the features of a character affected by change and unpredictability. It is the super-energy of the Romantic hero that precludes an image reduced to stable characteristics.

Almeida Garrett, the most important writer of Portuguese Romanticism, seems determined to portray a character that is inconstant and voluble, something that is frequent in figurations of European Romanticism. It is a kind of impossible project, as we see in Chapter 20 of *Travels in My Homeland* (1987)*,* Garrett's masterpiece novel, a hybrid account, which combines elements of travel writing, the novella, the fragment and the essay. It is in that chapter that the impossible portrait of the hero is spelled out, dispersed between commentaries, advances, withdrawals and interpellations to the reader:

> His eyes, which were grey and not very large, but extremely bright and lively, displayed the talent, the volubility, perhaps the thoughtlessness, but also the upright simplicity of a frank, loyal and generous character, quick to anger and quick to forgive, incapable of taking offence lightly, but unable to forget a real insult. . . . When he was silent and serious, his countenance could be said to be hard, but the slightest excitement, the merest smile, made it cheerful and sunny, because volubility and seriousness were the twin poles of that unusual, not easily understood character. (Garrett 116)

Volubility and bipolarity, are two terms which, explicitly or implicitly, appear in this figuration, which is condemned to be a failed attempt. In the case of Eça's short story, the characters were recognizable only by their shoes, and nothing more was necessary for them to be identified and remain static, as suited the realist doctrine. In Garrett's text, the character in constant movement means that stabilization is not an option, which opens up the way to a dynamic condition, long before the tools were available that today give full meaning to that potential.

4. I know well that, in Garrett's character, the tendency for change and bipolar oscillation has its roots, as I have already observed, in a worldview which makes that tendency necessary and justified. In other words: I am aware that mutability is not yet a property established by tools such as those that the digital world makes available, within a framework of technical references that Garrett, of course, did not know. And the reader, despite being often interpellated by the narrator, continues passive as regards the development of the story and characters. However, none of this prevented Garrett from conceiving a text in which I have long been able to read the assumption of a hypertextual logic inscribed into the genetic code of *Travels in My Homeland*. I recall what I defined in a 1999 essay as "the hypertextual suggestions of the *Travels*" (Reis, "As *Viagens* como hipertexto" 123),[2] founded on principles which we recognize in hypertextuality *per se*: the principle of interactivity, translated into a conception of the reader as an entity that is challenged to react, albeit rhetorically, to the text;

the principle of openness, which implies a text constructed as a syntagm of fluid syntax, permitting advances and withdrawals, and differentiated reading pathways; the principle of plurality, through the use of various genres and narrative levels, without any kind of fixed or rigid compartmentalization; the principle of fragmentation of the text into autonomous units, which the reader works to interrelate; the principle of simultaneity of times and spaces summoned for a reception in which the past and the present co-exist; the principle of playful activation, through the cultivation of an attitude that vacillates between entertainment and knowledge, risk and security, certainty and uncertainty, the fictional and the real.

Much of this is in *Travels in My Homeland* and its characters, particularly in that protagonist of the unstable portrait (if we can phrase it this way) of whom I have already spoken. And obviously, before Garrett was Laurence Sterne, expressly mentioned in the prologue and text of *Travels in My Homeland*; and after both of them came the great Brazilian novelist, Machado de Assis, an admirer and confessed follower of the author of *The Life And Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759) and also of Almeida Garrett.

I shall give just one example, taken from *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, the most "Sternian" of Machado's stories, published in 1881, almost 40 years after *Travels in My Homeland*. I shall again focus on character and its movements to reaffirm that dynamic condition which, long before the digital era, cultivated a figuration in constant mutation. In Chapter 90, in virtual dialogue with the son that is about to be born, Brás Cubas anticipates a future which involves the many facets and diverse conditions of that much-longed for son. The narrator says:

> The best thing was that we would both converse, the embryo and I, talking about present and future things. The rascal loved me, he was a funny little rogue, giving me little pats on the face with his chubby little hands or then sketching out the shape of a lawyer's robe, because he was going to be a lawyer and he would make a speech in the chamber of deputies. And his father would listen to him from a box, his eyes gleaming with tears. (Assis 135)

He continues his voyage in time in which the character (who is practically virtual, still an embryo) is one and is many, simultaneously concentrated, multiple and radically subjective:

> From lawyer he would go back to school again, tiny slate and books under his arm, or then he would drop into his cradle and stand up again as a man. I sought in vain to fix the spirit in one age, one appearance. That embryo had my eyes, all of my forms and gestures. He

suckled, he wrote, he waltzed, he was interminable in the limits of a quarter hour—baby and deputy, schoolboy and dandy. (Assis 135)

5. How can we pass from 19th century narrative to the mutations and developments brought by digital media and technologies? The response that I shall try to give to this question does not have the form of a temporal or conceptual rupture. Or rather, it does not cancel a certain narrative tradition and enunciation of the account/story. It is understood as a precursor of narrative experiences that the digital era has made viable: videogames and narrative in its digital format and electronic environment.

As regards videogames, particularly those that manifest a certain narrative impulse, their association with the logic of the fictional story as such is justified in function of the various features that they have in common: the advance of the story or game along a time line; uncertainty as regards its outcome; the use of simulation procedures with the "voluntary suspension of disbelief" and also the representation of figures—avatars or characters—that perform the action and display what appear to be human traits. The specificity of videogames is defined in the following observation: "The only feature that objectively and absolutely defines video games is their dependency on the computer as a material support" (Ryan 181). From there, Marie-Laure Ryan adds: "But if there is a general tendency that distinguishes them from other formalized games (sports and board games in particular), it is their preference for organizing play as a manipulation of concrete objects in a concrete setting—in a fictional world rather than on a mere playfield" (182).

The figuration of characters in videogames takes on a special significance in this context. I am referring to those games in which the character plays an important role: he or she is, in the language of videogames, a "playable character," that is, a figure whose actions are decided by the player and not by the internal rules of the game. The process of identification between player and character, typical of this kind of game, occurs in a framework of effective interactivity, which is non-existent in the reading of the conventional novel. But that does not completely detach the relationship of the player with the "playable character" from that other more diffuse interaction provoked by the novel, when a reader projects onto his or her own behavior something that he or she has read, or believes he or she has read, in the fictional character. The psychological and cultural condition that we call Bovarism, as a character-effect (cf. Jouve 132) is a pertinent example of this, though by no means the only one.

This implies that the narrative universe of videogames, on the side of both authorship and interactive reception, certainly owes something to a persistent narrative memory which cannot be expunged. On the contrary, it is reflected in the construction of narrative videogames and their characters. I believe

(though I cannot prove this here) that the behaviors and trajectories that the player attributes to the characters, and the outcomes that result from this, is an extension of the narrative experience of motives, stereotypes and human development that has such a broad tradition in Western culture and its stories. Another approach, which would lead me to make value judgements that I cannot do at present, would be to compare the literary character in its sophisticated complexity with the simplified schematization of the "playable character." Instead, I prefer to emphasize the following point: that certain literary characters—such as those in Garrett and Machado de Assis that I have called unstable and mutable—prefigure what digital technology allows us to do with other characters in a mediatic context that favors limitless interactivity.

In any case, whether we are concerned with the time of the 19th century novel or the digital era, narrative was and continues to be a demanding and fascinating meaning-making machine. In all cases, it is important to note that the digital narrative, enunciated in the electronic environment, has overcome certain principles and routines that were (and still are) dominant in verbal narrative, in general terms. First: textuality no longer obeys a linear and unidirectional logic. Second: authorship is no longer univocal, but instead has been opened up to collaborative composition involving multiple voices. Third: the narrative composition is made up not only of words but also of images, sounds, graphics, etc. Fourth: the text is open to reading trajectories that do not obey a rigid syntax but construct meanings through interactivity.

6. When a constraint-free textuality is elaborated in the framework of narrative texts, certain categories inherited from a long literary past become the object of radical revision. The character and its figuration is one domain in which that revision becomes inevitable, and may enable the establishment of a direct relationship between it and two concepts that I consider to be complementary: the concept of transmedia fictionality and the concept of emergent narrative.

Transmedia narrative "releases" fictional worlds from the restricted scope of literary narratives: "By now fictionality has become an important notion not only in literary theory but also in other disciplines, such as film studies, theater studies, computer games studies, and more generally the philosophy of art" (Zipfel 103). From here it is a short step to two correlated notions: the transmedia character and the "multimodal novel." As regards the second, I follow Wolfgang Hallet, who, without speaking expressly of digital narrative, says "since the 1990s an ever-growing number of novels have not merely consisted of verbal text," aggregating into the narrative discourse (itself a renewed concept) components such as "typed, handwritten, or electronic letters; film scripts; websites; pieces of academic writing; and many other generic forms"

(151). All this ends up transforming the reading process into an act of multi-literacy.

The characterization of emergent narrative is deduced from the primordial concept of emergence, diffused through various disciplinary contexts (cf. Walsh 73). Proposed by Tinsley Galyean over two decades ago (cf. Galyean), the expression *emergent narrative* brings to narrative studies the possibility of analyzing stories that have effectively emerged out of pre-narrative situations (such as a basic plot structure); from these pre-narrative situations, collaborative and interactive reading trajectories open out, generating a narrative which thus passes from the virtual to the active plane.

Narrativity is thus understood as a property that is as yet unverified in terms of verbal textuality but has instead an anthropological dimension. For this, Monika Fludernik argues "that narrativity *is a function of narrative texts and centres on experientiality of an anthropomorphic nature*" (Fludernik 26). If we accept this post-narratological definition of narrativity, we can also accept that "narrative is emergent, since it has emerged from human life experience. If 'life' seems too grandiose a concept to fit into a VE [virtual environment], there are smaller-scale examples in which explicit narrative structure is absent but narrative frequently emerges through interaction" (Aylett 84).

From here we drift to "smaller-scale examples" such as videogames and associate them both with real games in which they are often inspired, and with characters, also emergent, that are manifested in them. Ruth Aylett gives the example of football, as a team game in which we observe the emergence of narrative motivated by the behavior of certain appealing characters. The example suits me for two reasons: one, because a considerable number of videogames reproduce (using digital tools in an electronic environment) lively football matches, which are often more exciting than those we see live or on TV; second, because from football and its media treatment (and indeed, its representation in videogames) characters emerge with an impressive presence not only on the field but also off it. I realized this when I analyzed the media figurations and images of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi; they are an actualization (a narrative actualization, obviously) on the sporting level of the ancestral motif of the brothers in arms (cf. Reis, *Pessoas de Livro* 171−172). Returning to Aylett's text: "it's easy to understand which of the two characters corresponds to the description of the 'talented but petulant player who retaliates when fouled'" (Aylett 84).

7. I will not hide my difficulty (and it is certainly not mine alone) in fully apprehending character as an element renewed by narrative in digital support. I have at least two explanations for this. First: we are dealing with technologies in rapid change, not always, I suppose, motivated by effective needs of perfect-

ing the available tools. Economic interests which, in the world of computer sciences, intervene in research and development (R&D), create expectations that are often artificial and superfluous; false needs, in short, at least for the current user. The industry that generates those expectations responds to them with new products, rendering obsolete operating systems and programs, which become literally unusable. And thus, whoever today wants to "read" the founding works published by Eastgate Systems Inc. in Storyspace software, such as *afternoon, a story* (1987)*,* by Michael Joyce, *Victory Garden* (1992)*,* created by Stuart Moulthrop or *Patchwork Girl* (1995)*,* by Shelley Jackson, has extreme difficulty in accessing the versions originally produced in that software.

In addition to that (second explanation), the cognitive attitudes demanded by electronic literature—by its narratives or proto-narratives, by the lines of action proposed, the characters that emerge from them, those attitudes derive from a communicational paradigm that is not established. Or from a multi-literacy to which I have to adapt. I move through Michael Joyce's *Twelve Blue* (1996) or Anne-Cécile Brandenbourger's *Apparitions inquiétantes* (1998) and I situate myself in a context of interaction that dissolves and disperses the fictional character which, for me, was a stable and sometimes friendly figure. It's not easy to erase from our own cognitive routines a reading tradition which, particularly since the 18th century, has installed in our imaginary the faces and attributes of Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, Oliver Twist, Julien Sorel, Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina and Don Fermín de Pas, the Magistrate who, in a provincial Spanish city, seduced the beautiful Ana Ozores, who was also called "la Regenta." The same character, or perhaps already another that I still recognize when I pass by the Cathedral in Oviedo and come across her life-size statue, as flagrant evidence of the survival of a fictional figure.

After these and other characters, modernist and postmodernist literature, from Mallarmé to Jorge Luis Borges, passing through Fernando Pessoa (or Bernardo Soares), James Joyce, Kafka, Raymond Queneau and Julio Cortázar, gradually announced, as yet without suitable digital tools, the communicational paradigm of electronic literature. And already before these, writers of the 19th century (I recall Almeida Garrett and Machado de Assis) sketched characters in whom we read a certain impulse to free themselves from narrative constrictions which do not threaten their congenital instability. That instability, in complicity with digital narrative in its different manifestations, is deepened in texts and proto-texts in which narrativity remains active or latent. As someone said: before the digital narrative and its evanescent characters, we could read Bernardo Soares's *Book of Disquiet* (first published in 1982), fragments of *Finnegans Wake* (1939) or *Rayuela* (1963) by Cortázar. In all of them there emerge (invariably in a diffuse form) figures that reject the consistent character constructed by the 19th century novel: or, in an expression that evidently has pa-

ternity, all are assimilated to the "man without qualities" of a time of sick dispersion and ontological crisis without solution. Some of this was suggested by Bernardo Soares, when one day, in Lisbon, on the bank of the River Tagus, he hesitated between the inertia of tranquility and the instability of what he could not attain. Or rather: between being a stable figure or giving in to the temptation of disquiet, which makes him an *impossible* character in various titles. A character that "does not stand still":

> Sometimes, lost in vain meditation, I stand for hours in Terreiro do Paço, by the river. My own impatience tries again and again to tear me away from that quiet state, but inertia holds me fast. Gripped by a physical torpor, which resembles sensuality only to the extent that the whispering of the wind resembles human voices, I meditate on the eternal insatiability of my vague desires and on the perennial instability of my impossible longings. What afflicts me most is a sickness which is really only my capacity for suffering. I lack something I do not want and suffer because this is not true suffering. (Pessoa 93)

Notes

1   Project *Figures of Fiction*: <https://figurasdaficcao.wordpress.com/>. A dictionary about Portuguese characters (<http://dp.uc.pt/apresentacao/dicionario-de-personagens-da-ficcao-portuguesa>) and an annual colloquium (please visit <https://figurasdaficcao.wordpress.com/2017/07/18/5-o-coloquio-internacional-figuras-da-ficcao/>) are being organized under this project.

2   All translations were done by Karen Bennet.

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