

Chapter 8

Identity, Identification, and the Subject

The subject

A lot of recent theoretical debate concerns the identity and function of the subject or self. What is this 'I' that I am – person, agent or actor, self – and what makes it what it is? Two basic questions underlie modern thinking on this topic: first, is the self something given or something made and, second, should it be conceived in individual or in social terms? These two oppositions generate four basic strands of modern thought. The first, opting for the given and the individual, treats the self, the 'I', as something inner and unique, something that is prior to the acts it performs, an inner core which is variously expressed (or not expressed) in word and deed. The second, combining the given and the social, emphasizes that the self is determined by its origins and social attributes: you are male or female, white or black, British or American, and so on, and these are primary facts, givens of the subject or the self. The third, combining the individual and the made, emphasizes the changing nature of a self, which becomes what it is through its particular acts. Finally, the combination of the social and the made stresses that I become what I am through the various subject positions I occupy, as a boss rather than a worker, rich rather than poor.

The dominant modern tradition in the study of literature has treated the individuality of the individual as something given, a core which is expressed in word and deed and which can therefore be used to explain

action: I did what I did because of who I am, and to explain what I did or said you should look back at the 'I' (whether conscious or unconscious) that my words and acts express. 'Theory' has contested not just this model of expression, where acts or words work by expressing a prior subject, but also the priority of the subject itself. Michel Foucault writes, 'The researches of psychoanalysis, of linguistics, of anthropology have "decentered" the subject in relation to the laws of its desire, the forms of its language, the rules of its actions, or the play of its mythical and imaginative discourse.' If the possibilities of thought and action are determined by a series of systems which the subject does not control or even understand, then the subject is 'decentred' in the sense that it is not a source or centre to which one refers to explain events. It is something formed by these forces. Thus, psychoanalysis treats the subject not as a unique essence but as the product of intersecting psychic, sexual, and linguistic mechanisms. Marxist theory sees the subject as determined by class position: it either profits from others' labour or labours for others' profit. Feminist theory stresses the impact of socially constructed gender roles on making the subject what he or she is. Queer theory has argued that the heterosexual subject is constructed through the repression of the possibility of homosexuality.

The question of the subject is 'what am "I"?' Am I made what I am by circumstances? What is the relation between the individuality of the individual and my identity as member of a group? And to what extent is the 'I' that I am, the 'subject', an agent who makes choices rather than has choices imposed on him or her? The English word *subject* already encapsulates this key theoretical problem: the subject is an actor or agent, a free subjectivity that does things, as in the 'subject of a sentence'. But a subject is also *subjected*, determined, 'her Majesty the Queen's loyal subject', or the 'subject of an experiment'. Theory is inclined to argue that to be a subject at all is to be subjected to various regimes (psycho-social, sexual, linguistic).

Literature and identity

Literature has always been concerned with questions about identity, and literary works sketch answers, implicitly or explicitly, to these questions. Narrative literature especially has followed the fortunes of characters as they define themselves and are defined by various combinations of their past, the choices they make, and the social forces that act upon them. Do characters *make* their fate or *suffer* it? Stories give different and complex answers. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is labelled 'multiform' (*polytropos*) but defines himself in his struggles to save himself and his shipmates and to get home to Ithaca again. In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Emma strives to define herself (or to 'find herself') in relation to her romantic readings and her banal surroundings.

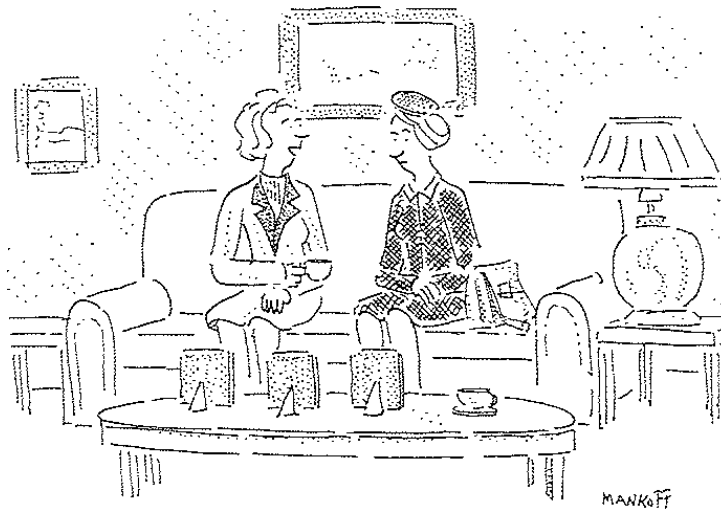
Literary works offer a range of implicit models of how identity is formed. There are narratives where identity is essentially determined by birth: the son of a king raised by shepherds is still fundamentally a king and rightfully becomes king when his identity is discovered. In other narratives characters change according to the changes in their fortunes, or else identity is based on personal qualities that are revealed during the tribulations of a life.

The explosion of recent theorizing about race, gender, and sexuality in the field of literary studies owes much to the fact that literature provides rich materials for complicating political and sociological accounts of the role of such factors in the construction of identity. Consider the question of whether the identity of the subject is something given or something constructed. Not only are both options amply represented in literature, but the complications or entanglements are frequently laid out for us, as in the common plot where characters, as we say, 'discover' who they are, not by learning something about their past (say, about their birth) but by acting in such a way that they *become* what then turns out, in some sense, to have been their 'nature'.

This structure, where you have to *become* what you supposedly already were (as Aretha Franklin comes to feel like a natural woman), has emerged as a paradox or *aporia* for recent theory, but it has been at work all along in narratives. Western novels reinforce the notion of an essential self by suggesting that the self which emerges from trying encounters with the world was in some sense there all along, as the basis for the actions which, from the perspective of readers, bring this self into being. The fundamental identity of characters emerges as the result of actions, of struggles with the world, but then this identity is posited as the basis, even the cause of those actions.

A good deal of recent theory can be seen as an attempt to sort out the paradoxes that often inform the treatment of identity in literature. Literary works characteristically represent individuals, so struggles about identity are struggles within the individual and between individual and group: characters struggle against or comply with social norms and expectations. In theoretical writings, arguments about social identity tend to focus, though, on group identities: what is it to be a woman? to be black? Thus there are tensions between literary explorations and critical or theoretical claims. The power of literary representations depends, I suggested in Chapter 2, on their special combination of singularity and exemplarity: readers encounter concrete portrayals of Prince Hamlet or Jane Eyre or Huckleberry Finn, and with them the presumption that these characters' problems are exemplary. But exemplary of what? The novels don't tell. It's the critics or theorists who have to take up the question of exemplarity and tell us what group or class of people the character stands for: is Hamlet's condition 'universal'? Is Jane Eyre's the predicament of women in general?

Theoretical treatments of identity may seem reductive in comparison with the subtle explorations in novels, which are able to finesse the problem of general claims by presenting singular cases while relying on a generalizing force that is left implicit – perhaps we are all Oedipus, or



'We don't believe in pressuring the children. When the time is right, they'll choose the appropriate gender.'

Literary Theory

Hamlet, or Madame Bovary, or Janie Starks. When novels are concerned with group identities – what it is to be a woman, or child of the bourgeoisie – they frequently explore how the demands of group identity restrict individual possibilities. Theorists have therefore argued that novels, by making the individuality of the individual their central focus, construct an ideology of individual identity whose neglect of larger social issues critics should question. Emma Bovary's problem, you can argue, is not her foolishness or her infatuation with romances but the general situation of women in her society.

Literature has not only made identity a theme; it has played a significant role in the construction of the identity of readers. The value of literature has long been linked to the vicarious experiences it gives readers, enabling them to know how it feels to be in particular situations and thus to acquire dispositions to act and feel in certain ways. Literary works encourage identification with characters by showing things from their point of view.

Poems and novels address us in ways that demand identification, and identification works to create identity: we become who we are by identifying with figures we read about. Literature has long been blamed for encouraging the young to see themselves as characters in novels and to seek fulfilment in analogous ways: running away from home to experience the life of the metropolis, espousing the values of heroes and heroines in revolting against their elders and feeling disgust at the world before having experienced it, or making their lives a quest for love and trying to reproduce scenarios of novels and love lyrics. Literature is said to corrupt through mechanisms of identification. The champions of literary education have hoped, on the contrary, that literature would make us better people through vicarious experience and the mechanisms of identification.

Representing or producing?

Does discourse represent identities that already exist or does it produce them? This has been a major theoretical issue. Foucault, as we saw in Chapter 1, treats 'the homosexual' as an identity invented by discursive practices in the nineteenth century. The American critic Nancy Armstrong argues that eighteenth-century novels and conduct books – books about how to behave – produced 'the modern individual', who was first of all a woman. The modern individual, in this sense, is a person whose identity and worth are thought to come from feelings and personal qualities rather than from his or her place in the social hierarchy. This is an identity gained through love and centred in the domestic sphere rather than in society. Such a notion has now gained wide currency – the true self is the one you find through love and through your relations with family and friends – but it begins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an idea about the identity of women and only later is extended to men. Armstrong claims that this concept is developed and extended by novels and other discourses that champion feelings and private virtues. Today this concept of identity is

sustained by films, television, and a wide range of discourses, whose scenarios tell us what it is to be a person, a man or a woman.

Psychoanalysis

Recent theory has, in fact, fleshed out what was often implicit in discussions of literature in treating identity as formed by a process of identification. For Freud, identification is a psychological process in which the subject assimilates an aspect of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, according to the model that the other provides. The personality or the self is constituted by a series of identifications. Thus, the basis of sexual identity is an identification with a parent: one desires as the parent does, as if imitating the parent's desire and becoming a rival for the loved object. In the Oedipus complex the boy identifies with the father and desires the mother.

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Later psychoanalytic theories of the formation of identity debate the best way of thinking about the mechanism of identification. Jacques Lacan's account of what he calls 'the mirror stage' locates the beginnings of identity in the moment when the infant identifies with his or her image in the mirror, perceiving himself or herself as whole, as what he or she wants to be. The self is constituted by what is reflected back: by a mirror, by the mother, and by others in social relations generally. Identity is the product of a series of partial identifications, never completed. Ultimately, psychoanalysis reaffirms the lesson one might draw from the most serious and celebrated novels: that identity is a failure; that we do not happily become men or women, that the internalization of social norms (which sociologists theorize as something that happens smoothly and inexorably) always encounters resistance and ultimately does not work: we do not become who we are supposed to be.

Theorists have recently given a further twist to the fundamental role of identification. Mikkel Borch-Jakobsen argues that

Desire (the desiring subject) does not come first, to be *followed* by an identification that would allow the desire to be fulfilled. What comes first is a tendency toward identification, a primordial tendency which then gives rise to a desire . . . ; identification brings the desirous subject into being, not the other way around.

In the earlier model, desire is the bottom line; here identification precedes desire, and the identification with another involves imitation or rivalry that is the source of desire. This accords with scenarios in novels where, as René Girard and Eve Sedgwick argue, desire arises from identification and rivalry: heterosexual male desire flows from the hero's identification with a rival and imitation of his desire.

Group identities

Identification also plays a role in the production of group identities. For members of historically oppressed or marginalized groups, stories prompt identification with a potential group and work to make the group a group by showing them who or what they might be. Theoretical debate in this area has focused most intensely on the desirability and political usefulness of different conceptions of identity: must there be something essential members of a group share if they are to function as a group? Or are claims about what it is to be a woman or to be black or to be gay oppressive, restrictive, and objectionable? Often the debate has been cast as a quarrel about 'essentialism': between a notion of identity as something given, an origin, and a notion of identity as something always in process, arising through contingent alliances and oppositions (an oppressed people gain identity from opposing the oppressor).

The main question may be, what is the relation between critiques of essentialist conceptions of identity (of a person or group) and the psychic and political demands for identity? How do the urgencies of emancipatory politics, which seeks solid identities for women, or blacks,

or the Irish, for instance, engage or conflict with psychoanalytic notions of the unconscious and a divided subject? This becomes a major theoretical as well as practical issue because the problems encountered seem similar, whether the groups in question are defined by nationality, race, gender, sexual preference, language, class, or religion. For historically marginalized groups, there are two processes under way: on the one hand, critical investigations demonstrate the illegitimacy of taking certain traits, such as sexual orientation, gender, or visible morphological characteristics, as essentially defining features of group identity, and refute the imputation of essential identity to all members of a group characterized by gender, class, race, religion, sexuality, or nationality. On the other hand, groups may make identities imposed on them into resources for that group. Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality* that the emergence, in the nineteenth century, of medical and psychiatric discourses defining homosexuals as a deviant class facilitated social control, but also made possible 'the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturalness" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified'.

Pervasive structures

What makes the problem of identity crucial and unavoidable are the tensions and conflicts it encapsulates (in this it resembles 'meaning'). Work in theory emanating from different directions – Marxism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and the study of identity in colonial and post-colonial societies – has revealed difficulties involving identity that seem structurally similar. Whether, with Louis Althusser, we say that one is 'culturally interpellated' or hailed as a subject, made a subject by being addressed as the occupant of a certain position or role; or whether we stress, with psychoanalysis, the role of a 'mirror stage' in which the subject acquires identity by misrecognizing him- or herself in an image; whether, with

Stuart Hall, we define identities as 'the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past'; or whether we stress, as in studies of colonial and post-colonial subjectivity, the construction of a divided subject through the clash of contradictory discourses and demands; or whether, with Judith Butler, we see heterosexual identity as based on the repression of the possibility of homoerotic desire, we find something like a common mechanism. The process of identity-formation not only foregrounds some differences and neglects others; it takes an internal difference or division and projects it as a difference between individuals or groups. To 'be a man', as we say, is to deny any 'effeminacy' or weakness and to project it as a difference *between* men and women. A difference *within* is denied and projected as a difference *between*. Work in a range of fields seems to be converging in its investigation of the ways in which subjects are produced by unwarranted if inevitable positings of unity and identity, which may be strategically empowering but also create gaps between the identity or role attributed to individuals and the varied events and positionings of their lives.

One source of confusion has been an assumption which often structures debate in this area, that internal divisions in the subject somehow foreclose the possibility of agency, of responsible action. A simple answer might be that those who demand more stress on agency want theories to say that deliberate actions will change the world and are frustrated by the fact that this may not be true. Do we not live in a world where acts are more likely to have unintended than intended consequences? But there are two more complex answers. First, as Judith Butler explains, 'the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated* opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed'. Speaking of gender as a compulsory performance, Butler locates agency in the variations of action, the possibilities of variation in repetition that carry meaning and create identity. Second, traditional conceptions of the subject in fact work to

limit responsibility and agency. If the subject means 'the conscious subject', then you can claim innocence, deny responsibility, if you haven't consciously chosen or intended the consequences of an act you have committed. If, on the contrary, your conception of the subject includes the unconscious and the subject positions you occupy, responsibility can be expanded. Emphasis on the structures of the unconscious or subject positions you do not choose calls you to responsibility for events and structures in your life – of racism and sexism for instance – that you did not explicitly intend. The expanded notion of the subject combats the restriction of agency and responsibility derived from traditional conceptions of the subject.

Does the 'I' freely choose or is it determined in its choices? The philosopher Anthony Appiah notes that this debate about agency and subject position involves two different levels of theory which are not really in competition, except that we can't engage in both at the same time. Talk about agency and choice flows from our concern to live intelligible lives among other people, to whom we ascribe beliefs and intentions. Talk about subject positions that determine action comes from our interest in understanding social and historical processes, in which individuals figure as socially determined. Some of the fiercest conflicts in contemporary theory arise when claims about individuals as agents and claims about the power of social and discursive structures are seen as competing causal explanations. In studies of identity in colonial and post-colonial societies, for instance, there has been heated debate about the agency of the native or 'subaltern' (the term for a subordinate or inferior). Some thinkers, interested in the point of view and agency of the subaltern, have stressed acts of resistance to or compliance with colonialism, and are then accused of ignoring the most insidious effect of colonialism: the way it defined the situation and the possibilities of action, making the inhabitants 'natives', for example. Other theorists, describing the pervasive power of 'colonial discourse', the discourse of colonial powers which creates the world in which

colonized subjects live and act, are accused of denying agency to the native subject.

According to Appiah's argument, these different sorts of accounts are not in conflict: the natives are still agents, and a language of agency is still appropriate, no matter how much the possibilities of action are defined by colonialist discourse. The two accounts belong to different registers, just as do an account of the decisions that led John to buy a new Mazda, on the one hand, and a description of the workings of global capitalism and the marketing of Japanese cars in America, on the other. There is much to be gained, Appiah claims, from separating the concepts of subject position and of agency, recognizing that they belong to different sorts of narratives. The energy from these theoretical disputes could then be redirected to questions about how identities are constructed and what role discursive practices, such as literature, play in these constructions.

But the possibility that accounts of subjects who choose and accounts of forces that determine subjects might peacefully coexist, as different narratives, seems remote. What drives theory, after all, is the desire to see how far an idea or argument can go and to question alternative accounts and their presuppositions. To pursue the idea of the agency of subjects is to take it as far as one can, to seek out and challenge positions that limit or counter it.

Theory

There may be a general lesson here. Theory, we might conclude, does not give rise to harmonious solutions. It doesn't, for instance, teach us, once and for all, what meaning is: how much the factors of intention, text, reader, and context each contribute to a sum that is meaning. Theory doesn't tell us whether poetry is a transcendent vocation or rhetorical trick or how much of each. Repeatedly I have found myself ending a chapter by invoking a tension between factors or perspectives

or lines of argument and concluding that you have to pursue each, shifting between alternatives that cannot be avoided but that give rise to no synthesis. Theory, then, offers not a set of solutions but the prospect of further thought. It calls for commitment to the work of reading, of challenging presuppositions, of questioning the assumptions on which you proceed. I began by saying that theory was endless – an unbounded corpus of challenging and fascinating writings – but not just more writings: it is also an ongoing project of thinking which does not end when a very short introduction ends.