

## I. Aims and general description

The basic aim of this dissertation will be to test the credibility of the Western concept of *individuality*, as it developed in early modern literary and philosophical texts, against the concept of *dividuality*, as it has emerged since the mid-twentieth century in the ethnographic writings of McKim Marriott (who coined the term), Marilyn Strathern (who is most responsible for its current usage), Roy Wagner, Chris Fowler, and other anthropologists. The Western sense of the unique, unitary, and cohesive individual—“kept separate,” as Fowler writes, “from social interaction and social personae, and explicable only as a factor of innate individual preferences and psychological character traits” (*AoP*, 4)—is to a large extent, many cultural historians argue, an artifact of novels like Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. My argument, by contrast, will be that, by the mid- to late nineteenth century, at least some British novelists were exploring ideas of personhood that would not come to formulation in theoretical terms until the latter part of the twentieth century, when anthropologists began to describe certain cultures, notably in Melanesia and India, as conceiving personhood to be both permeable and partible. The Western sense of individuality, these ethnographers argue, has no purchase on cultures in which people are understood to be “composed of social relations with others to the degree that they owe parts of themselves to others” (*AoP*, 8). Robinson Crusoe, alone on his South Pacific island, owes little to anyone but his ingenious, sturdy self; one could even say that Elizabeth Bennet, through most of *Pride and Prejudice*, labors to break free from the claims on her, or to parts of her, by family, community, and the marriage market. I shall propose, however, that by the 1840s, in novels like *Wuthering Heights*, English novelists were developing webs of characters who are better described as dividuals, rather than individuals. Characters like Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff exist, borrowing Fowler’s words about Melanesians, in “a state of being in which the person is recognized as

composite and multiply-authored” (*AoP*, 8). In my dissertation, I shall argue that British writers such as the Brontë sisters, Thomas Hardy, and Virginia Woolf were resistant to notions of individuality developed earlier in the history of the novel and sought to refute the early modern Western understanding of persons as “bounded indivisible entities possessing fixed innate character traits [and] alienated from their world” (*AoP*, 34).

## **II. Scholarly background and methodology**

Much controversy has surrounded the concepts of individuality and individualism, and much of it has been carried on in literary studies, where *character* is a key piece of vocabulary and a controlling idea. The emerging consensus appears to be that individuality is a prescriptive, time-bound, and culture-specific notion that does not express what it is like to be a person “from the inside” (as Fowler puts it), where personhood seems more “an interactive affair dependent on perceptions of others” (*AoP*, 17, 21). Hence alternatives to individuality and individualism have been sought in cultures as apparently alien to Western ways of thinking as possible. The methodology of my dissertation will be informed by my sense of the need for students of character in the Western novel to learn from recent ethnographic theory.

The idea of divisibility developed originally in relation to Indian cultures. Marriott explains, in his essay “Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism”, that “persons—single actors—are not thought in South Asia to be ‘individual’, that is, indivisible, bounded units” (111). But the largest and most influential body of individualist theory has emerged from Melanesian ethnography, where Strathern has argued that persons “are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that compose them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm” (*GoG*, 13-14). Indeed she contends that “people are multiply-authored....each person is a composite of the

substances and actions of others, which means that each person encompasses multiple constituent things and relations received from other people." Thus, at least in Melanesia, "internal composition depends on external relations, and relationships are condensed into physical substances or objects: anything that can be given away" (*AoP*, 26). The Melanesian person, according to Strathern, is both dividual and partible. "In being multiple", she says, "it is also partible, an entity that can dispose of parts in relation to others" (*GoG*, 185). Partibility occurs most notably in marriage exchange or ceremonial gift exchange, when "part of person A is owed to B, that part is externalized through a gift and absorbed by B. A has reduced scale to externalize B's family from A's dividual person. This part will be returned through a different gift object in the future" (*Aop*, 27).

Partible dividuality, however, is not conceived of as universal: it does not apply to south Indian culture, for instance, where a person is conceived as, not partibly, but rather *permeably*, dividual. Fowler clarifies this distinction between two varieties of dividuality: "Partibility operates through isolating and extracting parts of the person, and permeability circulates quantities of substance between discrete yet pervious people". Both types, however, "exhibit features different from the indivisibility that characterizes the western individual" (32). Marriot, in his study of Indian personhood and caste, examines how substances are transmitted from one person to another or from one body to another. "Substance-codes," as he terms them,

may be scaled from the relatively "gross" (*sthula*) to the relatively "subtle" (*sukhma*)...Indian thought understands subtler substance-codes as emerging through processes of maturation or (what is considered to be the same thing) cooking. Thus subtler essences may sometimes be ripened, extracted, or distilled out of grosser ones (as fruits comes from plants, nectar from flowers, butter from milk); and grosser substance-codes may be generated or precipitated out of subtler ones (as plants come from seed, feces from food). (*TaM*, 110)

Fowler adds that substance-codes “coalesce in people's bodies, but are also inseparable from the outside world: they are kept in constant circulation. Dividual people are constantly changing products of social interactions between themselves and others. Each component is therefore a manifestation of a relationship, as each substance-code has been acquired through social interaction” (25).

Identities of course change also through death. As Fowler writes, “Societies with an accentuated fractal and dividual understanding of the world acknowledge that aspects of the person come from specific places in the cosmos and return there after death. As well as illustrating the temporal nature of personhood, this also denotes that the aspects of the person can be mapped spatially within the cosmos” (87). “The fractal person” of Melanesia is, as Fowler explains,

relocated after death from the level of the individual to the cosmos. Facets of the person can exist both in human bodies and in the wider world. Personal life could be presented as a process, so that the person is finally completed after death, but then undone again as the process of transformation throughout existence continues. Personal qualities exist in all material things, and after death some of these features endure in things and animals: the dead are transformed to ancestral essence (image), to temporary spirits of things, and into wild animals (89).

The Hindu permeable person is considered dead only until cremation is underway. The fire refines the substance-code of the body while the soul is carried to heaven by the smoke, and the remains are purified by immersion in the sacred water of the Ganges. The fractal and permeable personhood of the Hindus, Fowler continues, “draws the elements that create and compose the universe, like fire and water, through the person, refining the substance-codes they encapsulate. The parts of the body are not kept as specific objects in

distinct places, but permeate the universe generally, sent into the sky and down the river” (96).

Of course I have no intention of comparing the English culture of the Brontës’ day, or Hardy’s, or Woolf’s, with Melanesian or South Asian cultures of our own time. Nor shall I argue that *dividuality*, though a term that was coined to describe tribal cultures, is in some way “applicable” to modern Western arrangements. My claim, rather, will be that, if there is a methodological problem about the applicability of terms like *partible* and *dividual*, the difficulty lies in its application to Papuans and Hindus. My argument will be that the concepts of Marriott, Strathern, and their colleagues were already inchoate in works of modern literature with which they themselves are familiar. In interviews with the Cambridge anthropologist Alan Macfarlane, both Strathern and Wagner have talked about the literary interests that directed them, when young, toward anthropology as a field of study. I intend to speak with them myself on these points to clarify what literary interests, more precisely, they mean and how their reading may have affected their thinking about the ontology of personhood.

### **III. Chapter Outline**

This project falls naturally into three parts. After a substantial introduction on “dividuality” and its superiority to “individuality” as a paradigm for research on late-modern English fiction, three case studies of English novelists—the Brontës, Hardy, and Woolf—will follow in chronological sequence:

#### ***Chapter 1 – The Brontë Sisters: From Self-Unity to Self-Fragmentation***

This chapter will explore the early Victorian notion of individuality as it appears in the fiction of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë. Readers typically approach their novels with

the expectation that individuality of the sorts found in Austen or Defoe will characterize the Brontës' fictional persons and their interaction but find instead that Brontëan personalities are curiously unindividualized, fractal, and unstable. The characters of a Brontë novel, I shall argue, tend to be complex, divided personalities consisting mostly of the deliquescence around them. Scholars have often resorted to comparing characters such as Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* to savages, in the ethnographic sense; I shall argue that what they have meant by this has been less a matter of the character's wildness or brutality than of his partible and permeable nature. In *Agnes Grey* by Anne Brontë, for example, while the heroine says that "there was no society in the neighbourhood" and the "only interaction with the world consisted in a stately tea-party, now and then, with the principal farmers and tradespeople of the vicinity, just to avoid being stigmatised as too proud to consort with our neighbours" (17), the narrator emphasizes the permeability of even the most civilized individuals. "I will not presume to say how far this irresistible power of assimilation extends," she says, "but if one civilised man were doomed to pass a dozen years amid a race of intractable savages, unless he had power to improve them, I greatly question whether, at the close of that period, he would not have become, at least, a barbarian himself" (156).

Most of the Brontës' novels deal with characters who move through a world that, equally, moves through them. In Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, for instance, the absence of social stimuli paralyses Lucy Snowe's inner growth in a way that individualist characters like Robinson Crusoe are not affected even by absolute solitude. While theoretically Lucy might find refuge and consolation internally, when alone she tends to experience a feeling of lost identity or even nonentity: "My spirits had long been gradually sinking; now that the prop of employment was withdrawn, they went down fast. Even to look forward was not to hope: the dumb future spoke no comfort, offered no promise, gave no inducement to

bear present evil in reliance on future good. A sorrowful indifference to existence often pressed me—a despairing resignation to reach betimes the end of all things earthly” (174). But when Lucy reenters the public sphere, her identity swiftly multiplies, and she finds that “she can define herself in a number of different ways, playing a variety of roles, responding to other people's expectations of her” (*TSC*, 205). Instead of building up Lucy as a unified whole, Charlotte Brontë represents her as a permeable site of fragments that can be assembled and distributed in various ways. Lucy understands herself as divided, though perhaps only into two parts or phases: “I seem to hold two lives—the life of thought, and that of reality; and, provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency of the strange necromantic joys of fancy, the privilege of the latter might remain limited to daily bread, hourly work, and a roof of shelter” (84). But her dividuality is even more complex than she thinks: when asked to play “a disagreeable part—a man's—an empty headed fop's” in a show, she feels as if she were forced to sacrifice her own image as a woman and *become* him (148). Her roles in the novel keep changing as she lives through the stories of other people's lives. When Miss Fanshawe asks, “Who are you, Miss Snowe?...But are you anybody? ”, Lucy responds: “Yes, I am a rising character: once an old lady's companion, then a nursery-governess, now a school teacher”. Miss Fanshawe becomes insistent: “Do – *do* tell me who you are? ”, but Lucy does not because she cannot. The fragments of her identity cannot be defined in the terms set by Miss Fanshawe (348-9).

While I shall argue, in this fashion, that characters in the Brontës' novels tend to be permeable and partible—Lucy's identity in *Villette* is an assortment of selves that never converge—this does not mean that their novels show no efforts made by characters to vindicate and realize the Western ideal of individuality. Marriage, in particular, functions as a means of imposing structure on dividual persons. In Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*, Edward Crimsworth impresses his own image on “his rich and handsome young wife”.

But it is not difficult for William Crimsworth, Edward's brother, to see that this imposed structure has reduced them both to mere "portraits" with no "clear, cheering gleam of intellect" (46). Sometimes, as in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, marriage is understood by the characters as the completion of a romantic quest for an other who will complete the self, but the author seems to have other ideas. The bond between Edward Rochester and Jane Eyre is not one between individuals as classically defined. When Edward says to Jane that "Every atom of your flesh is as dear to me as my own. . . . Your mind is my treasure," the hundreds of pages preceding his doing so make evident that this is no figure of speech. His words are so literally intended that, in a fictional context where individuality was presupposed, Jane's character would flee from Edward's house immediately (299).

The concept of permeable dividuality is useful even in its arcana for elucidating aspects of *Jane Eyre* that critics have often found impenetrable. One such is the novel's "madwoman in the attic," Bertha Mason, who seems less a person or even apparition than a disease-inducing substance flowing through Thornfield Hall. To use Fowler's description of such a substance, Bertha, though isolated secretly and under guard, remains "inseparable from the outside world" and "kept in constant circulation" (25). "Flows of substance," Fowler explains, "are media through which relations with others are generated, and used in altering the composition of the person according to specific doctrines of practice." (32). "I was wrong ever to bring you to Thornfield Hall", Edward confesses to Jane, "knowing as I did how it was haunted" (298). The madwoman is not a wife or even a woman in *Jane Eyre*, but rather an eerie substance that has blighted his past and retains the power to infect his future. Bertha Mason can be separated from Edward only by fire (as if in a Hindu cremation ritual), and undeniably, after the fire, he swiftly develops a subtler mode of personhood. The price he pays for it—his house, one arm, and his eyesight—is as high as Strathern might expect of any Melanesian tribesman. Already in 1847 Charlotte



Brontë was drafting the worldview of partibility, in which a marriage exchange—Jane is reunited with Edward—entails that “part of person A is owed to B” and is surrendered, only to “be returned through a different gift object in the future” (*Aop*, 27).

### ***Chapter 2 – Thomas Hardy: The Wish for Selfhood and the Victory of Society***

My second chapter will treat late Victorian individuality as it appears in Hardy’s fiction. Hardy’s characters, even more than the Brontës’, begin in communities where, as Fowler would put it, “personal concerns are shaped by a community-oriented moral code which does not stress individuality. Each person internalizes the community rather than standing in opposition to it” (36). In *Woodlanders*, for instance, the people who dwell in Little Hintock are of “old association” and possess “an almost exhaustive biographical or historical acquaintance with every object, animate and inanimate, within the observer’s horizon” (146). Likewise, at the opening of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, we meet a simple country girl who has had little exposure to the world outside Marlott. At this time of her life, we are told, she “was a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience” (26). Tess, however, with her vision of a higher reality, does all that she can to individuate but, as the narrator says, “the fates seemed to decide otherwise” (70). Tess does not seem to have an integral and integrated being; she regards herself as part of some historical pattern—“one of a long row.” Still, she decides, it is “best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’, and that your coming life and doings ‘ll be like thousands’ and thousands’ ” (184). If Tess’s identity was permeable at home, it becomes partible in the world outside Marlott: her identity, as my chapter will show, will become an artifact of others’ machinations, separating her into parts, as they pressure her to conform to their will.

Like Hardy's other heroines, the self-centered Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* actively desires to be an individual, one who is known to be alienated from the social framework. Sue fights for her independence and develops an idea of marriage that could preserve her autonomy. In the end, however, she surrenders to the pressures of her patriarchal society, returning to Richard Phillotson and living by the rules. Interestingly, for my purposes, her motives are superstitious: she believes that the death of her children was caused by her unconventional life, by her pursuit of individual difference. She decides, therefore, to go back to the social norms against which she had rebelled in pursuit of differentiation. Her return is a matter not of fate but of active choice. "We must conform!", Sue urges Jude, in terms a Melanesian islander might accept, while a contemporary Londoner might not: "All the ancient wrath of the Power above us has been vented upon us, His poor creatures, and we must submit." (409). Hardy's characters are often said to be harbingers of twentieth-century personalities; I shall argue, however, that even his most unconventional characters develop identities so permeated by the atavistic, primitive values and needs of others that their advanced ideas about transcending social norms come to no more than a fantasy, susceptible, at a tug from the author, to collapse.

### ***Chapter 3 – Virginia Woolf: Individuality Ceases Completely***

Chapter 3 will begin by measuring how far Woolf's understanding of the "I" is from those of early-modern European novelists. Although her narratives struggle to create a unique, unitary self, the supposed individual is always permeated—in uncontrollable ways—by others and is also divided, its parts distributed, among them. The self in Woolf's fiction is never realized as an absolute unity. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, Clarissa "would not say of herself, I am this, I am that". As she walks towards Bond street, she is drawn into thinking that "she must inevitably cease completely" (11). "She felt herself everywhere,"

we are told: "not 'here, here, here'; ... but everywhere... She was all that". The narrator suggests that, to know Clarissa

or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoke to, some women in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death. Perhaps—perhaps. (168)

Clarissa's theory of "apparitions" reads almost like a prototype for later anthropological theories of divided personhood, and it may well be: what British intellectual feminist in the second half of the twentieth century has not absorbed much of what Woolf had to say? "Social life consists," Strathern writes, "in a constant movement from one state to another, from one type of sociality to another, from a unity (manifested collectively or singly) to that unity split or paired in respect to another" (*GoG*, 14). Woolf's Londoners seem almost Melanesian as they shift identities while moving between one set of relations and another, but more realistically it is Strathern's Melanesians who should bring residents of Bloomsbury to mind.

In *To the Lighthouse*, continuing from where Mrs. Dalloway left off, Mrs. Ramsay suggests that "our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by" (53). Mrs. Ramsay often "found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at—that light, for example" (53). Her permeability permits not only relatives and

friends to reshape her identity from encounter to encounter but even lamps and lighthouses. Woolf, as I shall argue, depicts Mrs. Ramsay and her other protagonists as parts of the world rather than individuals.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, I shall review each of my three cases to observe and analyze how the British novel withdrew its allegiance to normative Western notions of the self as individual, autonomous, integrated, and indivisible. In the novels of the Brontës and Hardy, there is a tension between a desire for autonomy, more or less intense, and the inevitability of forming identity through interrelationships with persons and objects outside the individual self. Some Brontëan characters, such as Agnes Grey, Helen Graham, and even Jane Eyre, continue to be presented in terms of individual interiority, but in later decades Hardy's protagonists—though most of them wish to stand as individuals against any conventional way of living—all end up as what Roy Wagner terms “fractal” persons; that is, his characters end as entities “whose (external) relationships with others are integral (internal) to” themselves (*BMGM*, 159). “Fractal personhood” also characterizes the protagonists, both male and female, of Woolf's novels. Her characters begin and remain where Hardy's conclude: lacking any sense of individuality, her modernist characters are shown to be multiply-authored (authored by other characters, as well as by institutions and even objects) and are repeatedly divided, distributed, reshaped, and deconstructed into relationships, interactions, and social orders. My expectation is that conversations with Strathern and other ethnographers will sustain my argument that the Brontës, Hardy, and especially Woolf were crucial contributors to the idea that persons are better conceived as individuals—permeable and partible—than as individuals. If I find that other modernist novelists (Henry James and James Joyce, for example) are as materially involved, I am prepared to discuss their work as well in the context of chapter 4.

## **V. Chapter Headings**

Introduction: The Late-Modern Discovery of “Dividualism”

Chapter 1 – The Brontë Sisters: From Self-Unity to Self-Fragmentation

Chapter 2 – Thomas Hardy: The Wish for Selfhood and the Victory of Society

Chapter 3 – Virginia Woolf: Individuality Ceases Completely

Conclusion

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