

**Lucia Boldrini
(Goldsmiths, University of London)**

Person, Character, Ghost

Debates on literary character are often seen as divided, broadly speaking, between approaches that consider the character as analogous to a real-life person (and thereby, often, also as a textual vehicle for ethical / moral / social representation); and those which, especially in the structuralist and poststructuralist tradition, see characters exclusively as word constructs, which it would be fallacious and naïve – when not even downright dangerous – to treat (almost) referentially, as people that might exist in our extra-textual world.

While the opposition between those two approaches has never been quite as stark as this presentation suggests and several insightful studies, especially from the late 1980s, have sought to nuance the argument, critical interventions in the last 25 years have actively sought to reject or bypass that split. A chronological, incomplete list would include the studies by Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (1998); Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (2003); Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003); issue 42.2 of *New Literary History* (2011) edited by Rita Felski; John Frow, *Character and Person* (2014); and Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski and Toril Moi's *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (2019).

When the protagonist of the fiction is an individual who is recognized as having lived in the real world (as in biofiction, as opposed to the mainstream historical novel in which the historical individuals remain peripheral to the plot and the main characters are fictional), the dividing line between the alternatives of mimetic and autonomous character loses sharpness. Even the more nuanced recent discussions pay little attention to what happens when the *main* character is a recognizable historical person for which the reader both assumes a form of referentiality and of fidelity to documented fact while knowing they are reading a novel and that the character is part, therefore, of a fictionalised narrative.

What kinds of aesthetic, cognitive, ethical, historical question arise, then, from biofiction's construction of character? Does the grammatical person of the narrative (first, assumed to be [analogous to the] autobiographical, or third, assumed to be [analogous to the] biographical) affect our reading of character? What is the role of the proper name in these fictions? And how does the materiality of existence implied by the "form of referentiality and of fidelity to documented fact" I have mentioned above endure or dissolve when subjected to the fictionalisation of the person into character?

These more recent developments in the debate on character prompt me to return to the question I had examined in 1998 in *Biografie fittizie e personaggi storici. (Auto)biografia, soggettività, teoria nel romanzo inglese contemporaneo*, and consider how we can revisit and better understand, in their light, both “character” and the genre of biofiction – a genre whose popularity has increased exponentially and which testifies to the desire of readers to *read fictionally about real people*, accepting, even relishing, the challenge (and, perhaps, the impossible task) of discerning the boundary between the real person and the imagined individual.

Lucia Boldrini is Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Director of the Centre for Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. She holds doctorates from the University of Pisa (Italy) and the University of Leicester (UK). Among her books are *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction* (2012); *Joyce, Dante, and the Poetics of Literary Relations* (2001), and, as editor, *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*, with Julia Novak (2017), and *Medieval Joyce*. She is Editor-in-Chief, with Michael Lackey and Monica Latham, of the Bloomsbury “Biofiction” book series. She is an elected member of the Academia Europaea, and currently serves as President of the International Comparative Literature Association.