Note: this copy has been made from a PDF version of the 2005 Wiley Blackwell edition. The footnotes in that edition have been transposed here from end-of-book to end of chapter and the page-numbers have been omitted. Minor corrections have been made to the original where necessary—Note also that the sections on Fielding and Richardson—the latter from p.10 in this copy—are available separately as Chap. 2(a) and Chap. 2(b).

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## Chapter 3: Henry Fielding

Whenever a new literary form appears on the scene, there are two main ways in which it can try to legitimate itself. Either it can point to its very newness as the source of its value, or it can appeal to tradition. It can claim excitedly that the world has not seen the likes of it before; or it can define what it is doing as a variation on already well-established procedures, thus hijacking some of the authority of the past for its own purposes. In the case of the novel, the very name of the genre suggests that it is its newness which is its most striking feature. Samuel Richardson is proudly conscious that he has invented a new species of writing—one which, as he remarks in his preface to Clarissa, is ‘to the moment’, recording experience as it actually happens like a news photographer’s camera.

In Book 2 of *Tom Jones,* Henry Fielding likewise describes himself as ‘the founder of a new province of writing’, and goes on to point out with mock self-satisfaction what freedom this confers on him: ‘so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein’. The image is a political one, resonant of Crusoe on his island. Fielding is the governor of a newly established domain, and as a kind of absolutist monarch can make up the rules as he goes along. He is, to be sure, a benevolent sort of dictator: he will, so he promises us in *Tom Jones*, mercifully spare his subjects/readers the more tedious bits of his narrative by the elementary device of missing them out. Those readers who skip the boring bits of novels will get on famously with Fielding, since he saves them the trouble by doing it for them. Yet though he is paternally concerned about the welfare of his subject-readers, frequently arresting the narrative of his novels to check out how they are doing, he remains firmly, if good-humouredly, in control.

There is a cavalier touch about this. A gentleman is not to be confined by his own narrative, to which he should adopt something of the lordly air he assumes with police officers and land surveyors. Nor should he feel hampered by the bureaucratic regulations of others. If he obeys the laws, it is because he makes them himself. As a magistrate, indeed as the effective co-founder of the Metropolitan police force, Fielding was a dispenser of the law rather than a subject of it. Even so, it is not really true that he is at liberty as a writer to make up whatever laws please him, since unlike Samuel Richardson he is a Tory gentleman with traditionalist values and aristocratic connections. And this means that he is suspicious of individual innovation and experiment. What matters to him is tradition, classical precedent, and the collective, workaday wisdom of humankind.

It is these which are the true authors of human artefacts, whether they are laws, novels or political constitutions. For conservative Christian humanists like Fielding, Pope, Swift and Samuel Johnson, it stands to reason that what countless individuals have seen fit to believe and practise down the ages has more authority than an idea which some bright spark has dreamt up overnight. The modern must be a variation on the past, not a rupture with it. What we do is warranted in so far as it is, roughly speaking, in line with what our ancestors did. Change must only occur when it is unavoidable. In itself, as Samuel Johnson remarked, change is a great evil.

So it is that when Fielding comes to describe what he is up to in writing a work such as *Joseph Andrews*, he reaches almost instinctively for the categories of classical literature—though he then has to juggle with them a little awkwardly to capture the sense of what he is about. His novel, he announces in a famously overpacked phrase in its preface, is a comic romance—which is to say, ‘a comic epic poem in prose’. All of which sounds like too much definition rather than too little, not to speak of sounding rather like a series of contradictions. It is clear that however this novel is to be described, it is certainly not as a novel.

Such a piece of writing, Fielding comments, differs from ‘serious romance’ in introducing ‘persons of inferior rank, and consequently of inferior manners’. Literary categories, as often, are caught up with social ones. The novel, as we have seen, is in general more rooted in the life of the common people than more venerable genres; but it is interesting that Fielding should appeal to those classical genres to legitimate his introduction of low-life figures. The low social tone of the novel must be seen as in line with tradition, not as a transgression of it. It harks back to ancient comedy, which deals in the ridiculous and socially inferior.

There are several ways in which Fielding’s classical leanings conspire with his view of the modern world. He calls *Joseph Andrews* an epic, which is the most public of literary forms. The epic is concerned with the world of action, rather than with individual psychology or personal relationships. Its focus is external rather than internal, objective rather than subjective. It does not attend to a single human figure but to a whole array of them, all set in a richly specified social context. And it judges them by and large by what they do, not by what they feel or believe. Fielding is likewise not much interested in complexities of feeling, and his characters are not meant to disclose a convincing inner life. Instead, they speak often enough in florid literary *clichés* or set-pieces. The emotional artifice of his prose is very striking. As such, the epic, indeed classical writing in general, acts for writers like Fielding as a valuable antidote to the subjectivism and individualism of the age. It treats individual character as a function of the overall plot, not as an entity in itself. Character, as for Aristotle, is only important as a way of promoting the plot; it is not a value in itself. Aristotle even considered that you could do without it altogether.

The epic does not centre the whole world on a single isolated consciousness, as Richardson’s fiction tends to do. This, in Fielding’s view, is as indecorous and morally offensive as trying to centre the conversation on yourself. People with a sense of propriety do not pick over their private feelings in public. They leave that to ranting Methodists and luridly confessional maidservants. The conservative will tend to see particular men and women as deriving their merit and identity from a larger pattern, and subordinating character to plot is a metaphor for this. Focusing on a single character also prevents you from uncovering the truth, since truth for Fielding is a result of rational, objective, comparative judgement. It is a public affair, not a question of private sentiment. It is out in the open, not secreted in the depths of the human subject. If the truth is obscured by sentimentalism or errant subjectivism—if there are as many truths as there are individuals—then there is no firm basis for right conduct, and the political state is accordingly in danger.

The novel as a form, as we have seen, was associated at the time with just such subjectivism and sentimentalism. It was full of fervid fantasies and indecently unconstrained passions. Morally speaking, it mixed together good and bad, with scant regard for the absolute distinction between them. What made all this worse was that the novel was also a popular form, avidly consumed by the lower orders. It was the kind of thing your valet or chambermaid was likely to read. These men and women, lacking the benefit of a classical education, were therefore thought to lack the benefit of restraint and judiciousness, and thus to be more susceptible to trashy sensationalism. A classical education was also a moral one, fit for building character and producing the administrators of empire. These men had studied the classics at school and university, and thus were deemed well-equipped for, say, bloodily suppressing those in India or the Caribbean who posed a threat to British imperial interests. Classics made a man out of you, whereas the novel had a distressing knack of turning men into old women.

Besides, a classical education gave you a sound grasp of the few central, enduring truths of human nature, an entity which was considered to be unchanging from Catullus to Clive of India, and which it required no specialized learning to understand. Hence the long-standing English antipathy to psychology, sociology, political science and the like, none of which was really necessary for a gentleman who had read his Aeschylus. Hence, too, the ingrained English cult of amateurism. All of this is reflected in the popularity of the novel in England—for the novel is itself a kind of ‘amateur’ human wisdom, which requires no technical knowledge on the part of either author or reader. Its moral insights are the fruit of shrewdness, sensitivity and worldly experience, not of an intensive course of psychoanalysis or a degree in the social sciences.

What Henry Fielding meant by ‘nature’ was exactly this sense of the few vital, unchanging elements which all men and women shared in common. It was this which it was the business of the novel to represent. Non-classical, non-conservative writers like Defoe and Richardson would by no means have entirely demurred; but they were also gripped by the uniqueness and complexity of the individual life, which interested authors like Fielding, Swift, Pope and Johnson fairly little. As post-Romantics ourselves, the products (whether we are aware of it or not) of a rich heritage of individualist thought, it is hard for us to recreate the mind-set of men like Fielding and Johnson, for whom what people had in common was a matter of intense fascination, while their individual differences were fairly trifling and not worthy of sustained attention.

On the whole, then, the neo-classical imagination is fired by the universal and damped down by difference. It is about as far from the postmodern imagination as one could imagine. The distinction between classical and non-classical is in no sense absolute: Tom Jones, for instance, is a credible, indeed all too credible human being, and Samuel Richardson had a steady eye on the exemplary status of women like Clarissa and men like Sir Charles Grandison. In general, however, the Tory traditionalists are enthused by what men and women have in common, whereas the Whiggish progressives are excited by the feel of a specific human personality. They are drawn to particular detail, whereas Fielding has in his sights a general type. This is one reason why he can skip bits of the narrative with no great loss, since realism in his view is not a matter of naturalistic detail. Those flatfooted narrators who insist on cramming their accounts with minute details even when nothing very remarkable is happening are compared in Tom Jones to stagecoaches which are obliged to complete their journey whether they are empty or full.

For modern taste, it is naturalistic detail which is ‘realist’ and typicality which is not. But this is not how it seemed to Henry Fielding. Realism for him meant being true to what was typical about human beings, not to what was peculiar about them. ‘I describe’, he writes, ‘not men but manners, not an individual but a species’. When he assures the reader of *Joseph Andrews* that ‘every thing is copied from the Book of Nature’, he means that his story is realistic precisely because it conveys general truths about men and women, which are more weighty and enduring than local ones. What matters, for example, is the fact that someone is a thrifty innkeeper, not that he is a thrifty innkeeper with a squint.

Too consuming an interest in such peculiarities is idle and perverse, even though an author may well include them to liven up the text. Fielding does not in fact simply provide us with types: he sometimes makes them splendidly particular as well. Only untutored people, however, are enthralled by marvels and prodigies, by the aberrant and outlandish. It is this which distinguishes Fielding’s kind of sensibility from a modern or postmodern one. Virginia Woolf, one suspects, would be fascinated by the squint but only moderately by the profession of its proprietor. Dickens would be interested in both.

The fact that Fielding is interested in the typical does not mean that he is concerned with ‘pure essences’. The typical is not necessarily pure. In fact, what is typical of human behaviour for Fielding is its mixture of good and bad. Moral absolutes rarely appear in human form, which in Fielding’s eyes is no argument against them. It is just that there is a gap between the sacred and the profane, or the ideal and the actual, which shows up among other things in the morally hybrid nature of most people.

If the novel is to be true to Nature, it must capture this composite state; but how then can it not implicitly call into question absolute distinctions between good and evil? How is realism itself not to be immoral? An author who believes in moral absolutes, but who is also a realist, may find the form of his or her writing undercutting its moral values.

The very tones of realism—shrewd, worldly wise, wryly tolerant—are at odds with the high tone of moral absolutism. Fielding is renowned for his broad-mindedness: he can joke about sex as Richardson cannot, and has the kind of ‘relish for wholesome bawdy’, as Ian Watt puts it, that one associates with the better class of gentlemen’s clubs. You cannot be a gentleman and be shocked by sexual banter, since this would suggest that you were unworldly and unsophisticated. But it does not necessarily mean that you keep a string of mistresses either. Fielding did not make the puritan mistake of equating bawdiness with dissoluteness. There is, then, a dilemma: realism as a form can powerfully drive home a moral point, but it can just as easily undo it. How is realism not to sabotage its own moral message? Both Samuel Richardson and Samuel Johnson deeply disliked Fielding’s mixing of moral qualities—though Richardson’s insufferably upright Sir Charles Grandison is a dreadful warning of the priggishness which results when you fail to do this. As, indeed, is Fielding’s own improbably saintly Amelia.

Knowing what is typical of a thing includes a knowledge of how it would typically behave, and this is vital to the question of realism. For realism is a matter of probability, which is another word for typical behaviour. The ‘type’ or ‘essence’ of a thing can be thought of as its characteristic range of possibilities, the forms of behaviour which, being the sort of thing it is, we can confidently expect of it. It is not typical of psychopaths to display a burningly sincere regard for other people’s feelings, so that to portray one in fiction as doing so would be untypical and hence unrealistic. To know what is typical of things allows you to regulate and predict them, and is thus of value to conservatives preoccupied with law and order. You can reduce the quirky complexities of the world to a diagram of stable identities. Since these identities are fairly static, this, too, goes to confirm a conservative vision. People and things develop, but within fairly strict limits—the limits of their ‘type’. Nobody is likely to astonish you by transforming themselves out of all recognition overnight.

This is one source of conservative pessimism, since it means that your capacity for moral improvement is fairly restricted. Some critics believe that Tom Jones gets better as the novel progresses, but the development, if that is what it is, is hardly dramatic. He is still pretty much the same Tom at the end as he was at the beginning, which cannot be claimed quite so confidently of Dickens’s Pip or David Copperfield, or George Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke. Character in Fielding, as in Jane Austen, is not a process and unfolding. It is a set of fairly predictable dispositions. A Tory like Fielding does not believe that men and women are really fashioners of their own destinies. What is more important about them is their allotted places in family and society.

What fashions Tom Jones’s destiny is not so much Tom himself, as the plot in which he finds himself caught up. And the point of the plot is not so much to land you in a better position than the one you started out in, which is true of some of Defoe’s narratives, as to return you to where you properly belong. Your ending is implicit in your beginning. It is true that returning Tom to where he belongs by birthright, which allows him to marry Sophia Western, has the effect of uniting the two greatest landed estates in Somerset. By inventing a genteel pedigree for Tom, the plot manages to unite the two lovers without undermining the social structure, reconciling order and desire. Worldly advancement is not to be despised. But the point is to find where you fit in, not to make a tight-lipped cult of trying to improve yourself.

Fielding’s plots are impressively shapely and symmetrical, which is another way in which his classical training interlocks with his conservative standpoint. He believes strongly in the idea of a providential pattern in the world, and plot in the novel is a metaphor for this benign destiny. It is plot which finally brings the virtuous round to a good end and the vicious to a sticky one, ensuring that the innocent get their reward and the guilty their comeuppance. In fact, it has to be the plot which accomplishes these things, since the vicious characters are unlikely to reduce themselves to misery, and it would be unseemly for the virtuous characters to work for their own advancement. How could they do so and still remain virtuous? One of the several aspects of Richardson’s fiction which Fielding finds distasteful, and which he sends up in *Shamela*, his hilarious spoof of Richardon’s *Pamela*, is the fact that a supposed innocent like Pamela is fairly obviously working for her own elevation, even if only unconsciously. Chastity for Pamela simply means that she will only trade in her virginity to the highest bidder.

Fielding rejects what he sees as the middle-class utilitarian view that virtue will bring you worldly success. [1] Goodness should not be just another form of self-interest. It should be entirely for its own sake. The idea that virtue is the certain road to happiness, he writes in a delightful sentence in *Tom Jones*, is ‘a very wholesome and comfortable doctrine, and to which we have but one objection, namely that it is not true’. Virtue, then, has to be its own reward, since it is unlikely to win any other in a society as shabby as this. If *Tom Jones* were real life, Tom would no doubt have ended up hanged and Blifil might have become prime minister. He is certainly unsavoury enough for the job. It is only because they are in a novel that these characters can obtain their just deserts.

One reason why Fielding keeps reminding us that we are reading a novel is to enforce this ironic contrast between what should ideally happen to his characters and what is likely to have happened to them in real life. All the same, if one thinks of realism as a matter of typicality rather than real-life probability, it is more ‘realistic’ that Tom should end up marrying Sophia than that he should not. For ‘typical’ here includes a sense of what is ideally appropriate—of what is fitting from the viewpoint of providence, not just from the viewpoint of empirical events. What is ultimately real is not those events but a kind of moral paradigm which underlies them; and it is the privilege of the realist novel to show us this paradigm. In the happy ending, the empirical and the paradigmatic, everyday life and an ideal design, come harmoniously together. For once, what ought to happen does happen.

We must not, then, confuse fiction and reality, as novelists like Defoe and Richardson sometimes encourage us to do. This is among other things because they want their accounts to appear realistic, so that they will not be dismissed as the usual novelistic garbage; and since by ‘realistic’ they mean something like ‘true to the minute detail of everyday life’, they are concerned to close the gap between life and literature. Fielding, however, is not much interested in this version of realism, and therefore takes fewer pains to make us forget that his stories are invented. He is not, so he tells us in *Tom Jones*, concerned with that which is ‘trite, common, or vulgar: such as may happen in every street, or in every house …’. To scoff at such realism (or naturalism, as we might more accurately call it), is a social as well as a literary judgement. It is all right for a gentleman to present low-life characters, but an unpardonable sin for a seasoned *raconteur* like Fielding, or indeed for any gentleman around the fire at the club, to bore his audience by not editing his narrative for maximum effect.

By drawing attention to the fictionality of his narratives, Fielding highlights the fact that the real world is a lot less just than the conclusion of his novels would suggest. Yet it is not just a matter of smiling at the ironic discrepancy between the two. For the plot also represents the way things ought to be. Realism, as we have just seen, has an ideal component to it. Plot is a kind of providential redemption of the bunglings and injustices of everyday life. And this ideal is important, since without it we would have no standard against which to assess the shortcomings of that life. Without some sense of justice, we can have no conception of injustice—though the gloomiest situation of all would no doubt be one in which examples of justice could *only* be found in novels. So we cannot abandon our ideals; but for them to be more than romantic day-dreaming or idle utopianism we need to keep a wry eye on the gap between them and the way things actually are. Otherwise, Don Quixote-wise, we shall try to translate our ideals directly into reality, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

There is, then, a tension between the actual events of a Fielding novel, which suggest that the world is a fairly grim place, and the formal organization of those events, which suggests symmetry, poetic justice and harmonious resolution. Fielding is enough of a traditionalist to believe devoutly in these values; but he is also enough of a realist to recognize how widely they are flouted in reality. In this sense, the tension in his work between form and content corresponds to one between the ideal and the actual. This is not so with a writer like Defoe, who does not really shape the content of his work at all. Events just flow haphazardly forward, with no attempt to elicit a design from them. As we have seen, Defoe believes deeply in the existence of such a providential design, but this is more a matter of what he says than what he shows. Whereas in a Fielding novel, something of that design is actually present in the tight economy of the plot.

Fielding’s novels are funny, whereas funniness in Defoe is largely unintentional, and in Richardson fairly rare. Once more, Fielding appeals to classical authority for this kind of writing: Homer supposedly wrote a comic epic, now lost, which is sufficient guarantee for Fielding to indulge in a spot of knockabout humour and bedroom farce. Yet comedy is also a matter of his view of contemporary society, not just of his classical tastes. It belongs to his patrician outlook to be genial, amused, a touch laid-back. As a gentleman in real life and an ironically detached narrator in his fiction, he is sufficiently above the fray not to feel ruffled by it. He is presenting a spectacle for our enjoyment and instruction, not a world like Richardson’s into which we are emotionally drawn. There is a very English contrast between the sometimes dark or turbulent content and the jocose, equable tone through which it is filtered. Like a lord in his shirt sleeves, Fielding is so much in control that he can afford to relax. The narrator is expansive, unbuttoned and worldly wise, conducting a civilized conversation with the reader about questions of morality, problems of judgement and qualities of manners. That judgement is a difficult affair, worthy of such extended debate, is well illustrated by Squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones*, who for all his grave mien of authority is harsh in his judgements of Tom, Partridge and Black George, blind to the hideousness of Blifil and far too soft on Square and Thwackum.

Because the treatment is for the most part kept external, we are unlikely to feel anguish, horror or deep indignation. We can recognize how morally squalid some people are without losing our cool. Since we are not allowed to forget that we are in a novel, this pushes the action off to the point where we can make reasoned judgements on it, rather than clamber on stage and pitch in. We are detached from viciousness by the playful artistic form, so that it comes to seem less reprehensible. Too close a scrutiny of certain events might undermine the comedy. Even Booth, the blackhearted adulterer of Amelia, is finally rescued by the plot. Besides, to view characters from the outside is to see how ridiculously vain and affected they are, and a sense of the ridiculous is not easily reconciled with a sense of moral outrage. Fielding believed that defects such as vanity and affectation were the most common of all human defects—an optimistic view, since they are scarcely the most repugnant of faults, and can respond to the scourge of satirical comedy.

In this concern with common judgement, the novel plays a crucial part in what has been called the eighteenth-century public sphere, in which gentlemen meet on equal terms to carry on an unconstrained dialogue about the public affairs of the day. The aim of this dialogue is impartial judgement; and the way in which Fielding deliberately distances us from the action is meant to serve this end. The reader is the author’s interlocutor rather than his consumer. If this public conversation is to be fruitful, there can no pretence that author and reader are not actually there. This is another way in which Fielding’s novels call attention to their own fictionality, in contrast to a later realism in which the distinctive voice of the narrator disappears into the work, and the reader is simply ignored. Since reality itself does not have an author or a reader, literary works which suppress these figures seem the most realist. For either figure to appear within the frame of realism is to break its magical spell. It is not until the modernist era that the novel will once again put its own artifice on show, if for rather different reasons from Fielding’s.

Fielding’s good-naturedness, however, is not only a matter of tone. It is also a whole moral vision, one which reflects a certain genteel way of seeing. Fielding admires the kind of good nature which seems to come spontaneously, as a self-delighting overflow of high spirits. For one thing, this puts some daylight between his own moral viewpoint and that of the middle-class Dissenters, for whom virtue is a matter of hard labour and austere self-discipline. A gentleman, by contrast, does not have to work for his good qualities. Fielding believes in self-discipline, a quality notably lacking in the impetuous Tom Jones; but it should conceal the labour which went into its making, appearing as easy and natural as art. He is enough of a spiritual Cavalier to reject the Roundhead notion that virtue is a grim, strenuous, self-repressive affair. He also finds almost aesthetically distasteful the idea of anxiously monitoring your inner depths for the faintest flicker of depravity. It smacks too much of self-righteousness, puritan cant and tight-lipped authoritarian zeal. He would not have prospered in some regions of the contemporary United States.

Fielding maintains instead that true virtue is something to be relished, rather like a glass of fine port or an excellent roast chicken. It is a matter of benevolent fellow-feeling, and thus has something of the ambience of the gentleman’s club. It is part of the patrician ethic to believe that social sympathies are natural to us. You do not inquire why you should act in this benign way, any more than you inquire why you should enjoy a glass of port. Virtue is a matter of warm-heartedness, not of some cerebral duty, though like Tom it needs correcting by prudence and reflection if it is not to be led astray by its own reckless high spirits. Fielding is wryly aware that good-heartedness can get you into trouble just as much as lechery or ambition. Being carried away by your good-heartedness is a generous kind of error, however, and one more easily rectified than doing the right thing in a coldly legalistic spirit. When we behave with true virtue, we act from some impulse deep in our natures.

There is a sense in which to live like this is to be most fully ourselves. In such moments we yield to the generous promptings of the heart, rather than dutifully following some ethical rule-book.

‘Good-nature’, Fielding writes in his *Essay on the Characters of Men*, ‘is that benevolent and amiable state of mind which disposes us to feel the misfortunes and enjoy the happiness of others’, and this with no self-seeking or functional motive in mind, not from any abstract contemplation of duty, virtue or even religion. This kind of virtue is ‘without the allurements or terrors of religion’, which would simply involve another kind of self-interest. Instead, benevolence is a sheer disinterested pleasure: ‘What can give greater happiness to a good mind’, Fielding inquires in his *Covent Garden Journal*, ‘than the reflection of having relieved the misery or contributed to the well being of his fellow-creature?’ On this view, we have an innate moral sense which is quite close to the aesthetic one. Virtue, for example, involves imaginative sympathy with others, and so is close to the kind of capacity which distinguishes a novelist. It is also a kind of instinctive tact or feeling for what is right, the equivalent in the ethical realm of ‘taste’ in the aesthetic one. Like taste, it must be informed and educated: natural vitality is not enough, as coarse rural rednecks like Squire Western and Squire Trulliber well demonstrate. There is a callous, appetitive version of nature, as well as a beneficent one. In the end, however, there is really no substitute for a built-in moral sense. Either you have it or you don’t. Tom does and Blifil doesn’t.

Yet Fielding does not seem to believe that most, or even many, men and women are good-natured in this fundamental sense. This would be just the kind of sentimentalism he would associate disapprovingly with pulp fiction. From a Christian viewpoint it would also be heretical, since it denies the doctrine of the Fall. ‘Natural’ would not seem to mean common or average. The normative is not exactly normal. If Fielding is not a Thwackum, the brutal Evangelical of *Tom Jones* who preaches the depravity of human nature, neither is he a Square, the rationalist who smugly overlooks human frailty.

On the contrary, he is a hard-headed, worldly wise moralist with no mawkish illusions about humanity. He was, for example, a notably tough magistrate, who believed that all murderers should be hanged and did not consider that hardened criminals were worthy of compassion. To desire to save these ‘wolves’, he observed, was ‘the benevolence of a child or a fool’. In his *Covent Garden Journal* he describes adultery as an ‘execrable vice’, however lenient his novels may be about sexual misdemeanours. The noble Lord in *Amelia* comes fairly close to being evil. Fielding comments in *Tom Jones* that he has scarcely ever discovered ‘liberality of spirit’ in the lowborn, though the claim is countered in Joseph Andrews by the scene in which only the humble postillion boy comes to Joseph’s aid when he is assaulted.

The problem is that it is hard for the poor to be virtuous because they are too needy, and it is hard for the rich to be virtuous because they have too many opportunities for vice. Allworthy in *Tom Jones* is unusual in combining goodness with power, a rare enough combination. On the other hand, Fielding remarks in his novel *Jonathan Wild* that while few people have the potential to be perfectly honest, not one in a thousand is capable of being a complete rogue. In the novel itself, most characters act out of self-interest, but none is so utterly ruthless as Wild himself. All men and women are capable of goodness, which rebuts the Calvinistic case that they are all sunk hopelessly in corruption.

It is true that there are genetically villainous types like Blifil who are born plain nasty, and whom no amount of education or social influence will redeem. Tom and Blifil are brought up in exactly the same environment, yet turn out morally speaking to be polar opposites. This is a smack in the face for the progressives who champion nurture over nature. Yet though education can have no effect on the thoroughly vicious, neither can it corrupt the truly righteous. As for those in the middle, it can certainly do some good. Fielding remarks in his novel *Amelia* that ‘true goodness is rarely found among men’, but this may in part be the effect of evil influences rather than innate qualities. Dr Harrison, a character in the novel, voices this opinion when he observes that ‘The nature of man is far from being in itself evil; it abounds with benevolence, charity and pity … bad education, bad habits and bad customs debauch our nature, and drive it headlong as it were into vice’.

Reason, Fielding considered, could help hold our passions in check—a view directly opposed to the radical Protestant line that reason is powerless in the face of human depravity, which only divine grace can repair. It is also a view directed against those frigid rationalists who do not have enough passion to need controlling. Fielding does not want to give too much comfort to the progressives by pressing the environmentalist case about human conduct too hard, but he also needs to answer an embarrassing question: if virtue is in some sense natural, how come there are so many rogues around? The idea of corrupting influences can go some way towards an answer; but where do they come from? If the answer is ‘human nature’, then the argument seems to have undermined itself.

That the world is well populated with scoundrels presents a problem for the virtuous. There is a long tradition in the novel of the innocent abroad, the grandfather of them all being Don Quixote. One thinks of Gulliver, Joseph Andrews and Parson Adams, Laurence Sterne’s Yorick and Uncle Toby, Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas, Richardson’s Pamela and Clarissa, Goldsmith’s Dr Primrose, Jane Austen’s Catherine Morland and Fanny Price, Jane Eyre, Oliver Twist, Dorothea Brooke, Catherine Sloper, Isabel Archer, Milly Theale and Tess Durbeyfield. Some of these, to be sure, are more innocent than others, and other fictional protagonists like Tom Jones are a combination of innocent and picaro (the picaresque rogue, like Thackeray’s Becky Sharp). Because rogues can be lovable, the line between them and innocents is not always clear.

The problem with the virtue of innocents is that it is actually funny. Even the word ‘virtue’ itself has a faintly ludicrous Victorian ring to it. Fielding’s Shamela speaks of her ‘vartue’, as though it were some kind of spiritual handbag to which she clings. The innocent are admirable, but there is something callow and credulous about them as well. Fielding’s Amelia is shocked by Mrs Atkinson’s machinations to win a commission for her husband, but Mrs Atkinson simply calls her a prude.

Rogues may be reprehensible, but they are more fun than the god-fearing. The devil, as usual, has all the best tunes. Tom Jones is not exactly a rogue, but we relish his lusty animal spirits and forgive him his imperfections. Even Richardson’s rapist Lovelace has his genuinely appealing aspects, and Clarissa cannot help but feel them. A whiff of danger can be an aphrodisiac. There is something mildly unreal about goodness, as well as something distastefully high-minded about the solemn rhetoric in which it is generally wreathed. Virtue gives rise to verbiage, and the understated English do not usually go in for such effusions. The upright are meek, passive, tediously well-behaved creatures.

They have the pathos of victims rather than the spiritedness of heroes.

‘Wherever virtue is found in any eminent degree’, Cervantes writes in Don Quixote, ‘it is always persecuted’. We feel sorry for the persecuted, of course, but they are not riotously good company.

They may have all the merit, but it is rascals who have all the life. It is true that we are more likely to believe this of fictional rascals rather than real-life ones, since the former can do us no harm. You do not find yourself chuckling indulgently over those who have just cleaned out your bank account or broken your nose. Yet it is still a fact that virtue is hard to dramatize in ways that make it attractive.

This, no doubt, is a comment less on virtue itself than on a particular modern version of it. A middleclass society which sees virtue in terms of prudence, thrift, chastity, abstinence and self-discipline is clearly going to find something secretly glamorous about sin. Samuel Richardson was alarmed to discover that his villain Lovelace had turned into a kind of Freddy Krueger, with a devoted cult following.

The trouble with holy innocents like Don Quixote, or Parson Adams of *Joseph Andrews*, is that it is not always easy to distinguish their moral innocence from simple ignorance, which is of no particular credit to them. As Quixote shows, a goodness which is simply blind to the world can wreak havoc in it. Goodness is necessarily out of line with a wicked world; but to be too far out of line with the way things are is a kind of madness. True virtue, as Milton maintained, must surely do battle with the world, which requires having knowledge of it. Yet how is innocence to have dealings with a corrupt world and still be innocent? Goodness can only survive in a predatory society if it calculates and looks sharp for itself; but how can it do this and still be spontaneous? It must be slow to impute malign motives to others, yet it is precisely this which lays it open to their nefarious schemes.

The more you are forced to defend your good nature, the less of it you would seem to have. If, like Fielding, you see virtue both as spontaneous and as in fairly short supply in the world, this means that the good will find themselves under constant siege without being furnished with the cunning and vigilance they need to cope with these onslaughts. If true goodness is in short supply, then those who practise it are to be all the more commended; but for the same reason they cannot help appearing eccentric. Adhering to principles in a culture where most people violate them makes you as disruptive as a motorist who maintains the lowest possible speed on the motorway for hours on end.

Fielding advances his Christian ideals of charity, chastity and non-violence in deadly earnest, but he is bound to be aware that in this sort of society there is something absurd about them as well.

Virtue is true in theory but false in practice, since it is generally ineffectual. And this, for anti-theoretical Englishmen like Fielding, Defoe, Swift and Johnson who put great store by practicality, is something of a problem. It is society’s fault, not virtue’s, that it should seem so ridiculous, but this does not stop you smiling at it. Those who find your virtue amusing are at once disreputable and right.

Like the theoretical knowledge which the eighteenth-century novelists for the most part satirized, the claim that you should practise good nature is at once true and pointless. It has the hollowness of statements to which everyone perfunctorily assents, such as the proposition that death comes to us all or that you never know what’s round the next corner. In a vicious society, sanctity is bound to appear sanctimonious.

This is why, in a comic double-focusing, Fielding uses morally righteous characters like Joseph, Fanny and Adams to expose the degeneracy of the world, while at the same time sending them up. The ideal and the actual put each other constantly into question. Innocent characters can act as transparent windows on to social life because, being colourless and unworldly, they do not obtrude their egos between the reader and how it is with the world. Like Gulliver, they have a kind of blankness about them, which is as admirable as it is annoying. The good nature of Heartfree in *Jonathan Wild* is ironically described as a weakness, but the irony is double, since in a sense it is. It certainly makes him alarmingly vulnerable to Wild’s depredations. Joseph Andrews is ridiculous because chastity in a man seems comic; but the fact that he is a man also means that he can be active and powerful in a way that is harder for a woman of the period, and this allows us a rare glimpse of a kind of goodness which is not simply passive and victimized. Neither is Joseph scheming for his own self-advancement, which means that he is the right kind of Pamela.

Much the same is true of Parson Adams, who is in one sense yet another example of the idly theoretical nature of goodness, but who fails impressively to practise the stoical detachment he preaches. As a man who advocates moral indifference yet cannot help getting passionately involved, Adams demonstrates that there can be a constructive as well as hypocritical conflict between what you say and what you do. He is a sententious moralist of the kind Fielding distrusts, but he is also an example of how moral idealism can be a practical, worldly affair. There can, in short, be a worldly kind of unworldliness. You can be worldly in a positive sense, just as you can be unworldly in a negative one, like the misanthropic Man of the Hill.

As with *Tom Jones*, however, it will take the plot to bring the long-suffering trio of Adams, Joseph and Fanny round to a felicitous conclusion. If this is an inspiring image of Providence, it is also testimony to how feeble goodness actually is in this world. Richardson will allow no such consolations at the end of *Clarissa*; in his view, it would not be true to Nature to allow his novel a happy ending. If Fielding’s novels show individuals adapting to the social order, *Clarissa* shows one being crucified by it.

The relation between innate goodness and social influences is one aspect of the relation between Nature and nurture. Another is the relation between desire and social class. Fielding recognizes that desire is no respecter of social class, and is thus inherently subversive. When Lady Booby makes erotic advances to Joseph, we are meant to disapprove of this impropriety—a lady should not sexually proposition her servant—but also to smile at it, since it reveals how human nature, class notwithstanding, is everywhere the same. By transgressing social rank so shockingly, Lady Booby reminds us of its importance, but also of its artifice. The incident satirizes and upholds the class system at the same time. We are invited to admire Joseph’s refusal of her advances on both moral and social grounds: it goes to confirm his moral worth, at the same time as it underlines his respect for his superiors. Yet we, like the narrator, are also amused by his scandalized reaction to his mistress’s flirtations, since knowing more of the world than he does we are aware of how ‘natural’ this ‘unnatural’ flouting of social hierarchy actually is. If Lady Booby is satirized, so is Joseph, in a typical piece of Fieldingesque double-focusing.

This ambiguity about the value of social standing is common in the eighteenth-century novel. In his *Essay on Conversation*, Fielding admits that social differences of this kind ‘have in a philosophical sense no meaning, yet are perhaps politically essential, and must be preserved by good-breeding’. It is servile to worship riches, and contempt for others on account of rank is vile and base: ‘that the fortuitous accident of birth, the acquisition of wealth … should inspire men with an insolence that is capable of treating the rest of mankind with disdain is so preposterous that nothing less than daily experience could give it credit’. This is scarcely revolutionary stuff: it belongs to true gentility to despise those who make a fuss of wealth or status. The lowest class morally speaking, Fielding adds, is the beau and fine lady. Even so, ‘respect and deference … may be paid to the rich and liberal from the necessitous’. He would not wish to withdraw from those with titles ‘that deference which the policy of government has assigned it’.

So rank means little or nothing in itself, but is nevertheless to be defended as an ‘unavoidable imperfection’. Historically speaking, we have reached the point at which a belief in a common human nature is threatening to undermine the whole basis of social hierarchy. As a result, that system must now be defended less in traditionalist terms, as a divinely ordained order, than in the more pragmatic language of social custom, stability and convenience. It is the kind of objectively dishonest argument which Fielding himself would doubtless have been quick to satirize had the subject not been so close to the bone. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment idea of a common human nature, nowadays derided by all devout postmodernists, will wreak havoc with social hierarchy and issue in political revolution. Class is a fiction, which one needs to be suitably ironic about, as Fielding is about his novels. Like the novel, however, it is a necessary fiction, and one’s irony should not be allowed to keel over into iconoclasm.

[…; ensuing pages deal with Samuel Richardson.]

### Notes.

1. One of his great predecessors in this opinion is Niccolo Machiavelli. In rejecting the classical humanist doctrine of Cicero and others that only virtuous conduct will result in worldly success, Machiavelli is one of the chief sources of the severing of the link between virtue and power, or value and fact, which characterizes modernity.