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).

.

## Chapter 3: Samuel Richardson

[…]

Fielding’s fiction, as we have seen, is more about judgement and observation than experience. It does not invite us to identify with its characters, rejoice in their triumphs or suffer alongside them. To use Bertolt Brecht’s blunt words to his actors, Fielding is not performing ‘for the scum who want the cockles of their hearts warmed’. Samuel Richardson, on the other hand, is much concerned to warm the cockles of our heart, provoke our tears, stir our sympathies and rouse our antagonisms. The reader must be allowed to share the experience of the characters; and this means developing a form of writing so immediate and transparent that it gives us access to that experience as it is actually happening. In *Pamela*, the heroine is scribbling away even as the debauched Mr B. is scrambling after her virginity, a situation wickedly parodied in Fielding’s *Shamela*: ‘Mrs Jervis and I are just in bed, and the door unlocked; if my master should come—Ods-bobs! I hear him just coming in at the door.

You see I write in the present tense, as Parson Williams says. Well, he is in bed between us …’.

This is one sense in which realism, pushed to an extreme, capsizes into non-realism. ‘On one knee, kneeling with the other, I write!’, Lovelace tells us. ‘My feet benumbed with midnight wanderings through the heaviest dews that ever fell: my wig and my linen dripping with the hoar frost dissolving on them!’ It does not seem to occur to him to stop writing and change his shirt. One suspects that some of Richardson’s characters would still be scribbling away as the firing squad raised its rifles.

Such immediacy is as much an artifice as those TV stations who announce that they are bringing us the news ‘as it happens’, but angle and edit it even so. For the neo-classical Fielding, to pivot everything on the present moment in this way is a moral as well as literary mistake. It is to sacrifice context, tradition and comparison to a bogus immediacy, one which abolishes the distance essential for true judgement.

This, then, is Richardson’s celebrated writing ‘to the moment’; but it might better perhaps be described as a kind of anti-writing. Language must give way to experience itself. Words must have no material texture or density of their own, which might distract us from what they portray. The signifier must melt into one with the signified. There must be no troubling gap between experience and expression, content and form. Fielding’s writing, as we have seen, thrives on just such a gap: we are made constantly aware of the ironic discrepancy between the shapeless stuff which is being represented, and how it is shaped by the author’s art into significant design.

Richardson, by contrast, wants a kind of pure or ‘degree zero’ kind of writing, one which will be the medium of unambiguous truth. Language must not interpose its ungainly bulk between the reader and the experience. Yet he is glumly aware that this is an impossible ideal, one which writing itself undoes at every step. For one thing, it is naive to imagine that language simply ‘reflects’ experience, as Richardson’s Lovelace is well aware. What do words like ‘maybe’ or ‘prestigiously’ reflect? Language helps to constitute human experience, not just to reflect it. For another thing, writing is bound to be somewhat slippery simply because it has to be interpreted; and this means that for every signifier, there is a whole range of possible signifieds. Nothing could in principle just mean one thing. The reader is not just a passive receptacle of the author’s meaning, but an active co-creator of it. And this makes room for all kinds of ambiguities.

Richardson, as a devout puritan who believes in absolute moral values, is forever struggling to control his texts so as to ensure the correct reading of them. He is forever sanitizing and overhauling his works, ‘policing’ them for the least stain of social infelicity or potential indelicacy. ‘Low’ terms and mistakes of manners are ruthlessly expunged in the interest of ‘polite’ letters. This master printer is out to master print, wrenching it into the service of a single meaning. Yet his writing is constantly in danger of exceeding his intentions and generating ‘illicit’ interpretations which he hastens to disown. Writing is needed to convey truth and reality to a reader; but it is also a sprawling mesh of dangerously open-ended signs, which threatens to undermine the very truth it conveys. The fact that the villainous Lovelace attracted a sizeable fan club among the novel’s readers, while some readers found Clarissa’s saintliness unbearably priggish, is a case in point. Alarmed at such perverse misreadings, Richardson adds more writing to what he has written already, in order to insulate his work from all conceivable misconceptions. But the more writing he adds, the more material there is to be misinterpreted.

The problem is exacerbated by Richardson’s epistolary form—the fact that his novels are made up in large part of letters from one character to another. This achieves the immediacy he is after, as the letter—that most spontaneous, up-to-the-moment, self-confessional of forms—gives us access to the inner truth of his characters. But to write the novel in this way means abandoning an authorial voiceover—which means that there is no ‘metanarrative’ to guide our reading of the mini-narratives of the letters. Much of the time, there is no Fieldingesque narrator to argue, advise, apologize or explain. What we have instead is an incessant circulation of material signs, in which letters come to take on a strange, fetishistic life of their own. These bits of matter seem to be imbued with the living presence of persons, and exert an uncanny power over men and women. In a sense, it is they which are the protagonists of the drama. They are pursued, protected, hidden, kissed, buried, wept over, physically assailed. Richardson is not so much writing texts about a drama, as writing about a drama of texts.

Words, in a sense, are stand-ins for things; and to that extent they can act as fetishes, as the letters in the novel do, since for Freud the fetish is a kind of stand-in which plugs an intolerable lack. Letters substitute themselves for physical presence, plug gaps in physical intercourse, and at times become almost a metaphor for sexual congress. The true fetish of *Clarissa*, however, is the body of Clarissa herself, which represents for Lovelace the unattainable fullness and perfection which might fill in his own terrible lack of being. The two thousand pages of *Clarissa* revolve around an act—the rape—which is never represented there. Lovelace’s climax is also the novel’s great anti-climax.

Signs, despite Richardson’s intentions, do not succeed in nailing down reality. Language is a kind of supplement or addition to reality; yet with the ‘non-event’ of the rape, it is almost as though the physical is merely a kind of supplement to writing. After being raped, Clarissa more than once refers to her own body as ‘nothing’; and though this may well register guilt and self-loathing, it must be taken together with her assertion ‘I am nobody’s’, which rebuffs all patriarchal claims over her person. The violated body of Clarissa slips through the net of writing. The rape, so to speak, is the Real which resists representation. Indeed, one mildly fanciful critic has questioned whether it ever happened at all. [2] On the one hand, letters are intimate revelations of the private self, torn from the individual’s inner depths still dripping with emotion. Letters in Richardson are residues of the body: they come damp with tears, blotted with sweat or creased in haste or rage. Yet they also mark the point at which that private sphere borders on a public regime of power, property and patriarchy. In the letter, intimacy and political intrigue merge into one. It is thus not surprising that letters should become a kind of metaphor of sexuality itself, even if the actual body is necessarily absent from them. Pamela wears her text around her waist, and Mr B. threatens to strip her to discover it; and the libertine Lovelace is a literary *voyeur* who swears that ‘I shall never rest until I have discovered where the dear creature puts her letters’. In fact, he will never discover ‘where the dear creature puts her letters’, never lay bare the sources of her subjectivity.

Letters in Richardson are forged, waylaid, stolen, lost, copied, censored, parodied, misread, submitted to mocking commentary, woven into other texts which alter their meaning, exploited for ends unforeseen by their authors. Writing and reading are always at some level illicit intercourse, since there can always be a fatal slip between intention and interpretation, production and reception. Letters are what lay the private, unprotected self open to the manipulations of a hostile world. Which is to say, by and large, the private domain of women to the public realm of men.

Ironically, however, Clarissa’s kind of writing might today be seen as ‘masculine’, while it is Lovelace’s which is stereotypically ‘feminine’. Lovelace’s language is playful, ambiguous and selfdelighting, full of self-indulgent fiction and fantasy. For him, language is as compulsive and inexhaustible as desire: we are told that he ‘has always a pen in his fingers when he retires’, and the erotic *double entendre* is surely deliberate. This novel’s unconscious is not coyly concealed but brazenly out in the open. For a man, Lovelace spends far too much time writing, rather as he might spend too much time shaving his legs. Like Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, writing and living are for him almost synonymous. ‘I must write on, and cannot help it’, he observes. He is a kind of eighteenth-century post-structuralist, a Roland Barthes in knee-breeches who is obsessed with the act of writing, and who uses language strategically rather than truthfully. Writing for Lovelace is a form of power as well as desire, a set of artful devices by which he hopes to ensnare Clarissa. He can unfix a sign as deftly as he can break a hymen.

Clarissa, by contrast, believes that language should be a transparent medium of the truth. The chaste woman rejects the promiscuous play of the signifier for a unity of signifier and signified, in which words say just what you mean them to say and no more. Behind the unified sign lies the unified self, one which must always be in control of its own meanings. Lovelace rejoices in the way his writing takes him over. His self is as protean and diffuse as his language. As a devout middle-class puritan, Clarissa believes in a sober, stable regime of sense, not in the licentiousness and instability of the wicked aristocrat. Even she, however, feels the lure of desire: she is forced at times to confess that writing for her, too, is obsessive and excessive. For Clarissa, language or writing are valid only as vessels of truth; they are not to be shamelessly indulged in for their own sake. We have encountered this already in Defoe: just as sexuality should be a form of reproduction rather than self-pleasuring, so writing should be a form of representation rather than a revelling in the signifier.

Yet this is a strange doctrine for a man who earns his living through spinning those baseless fantasies known as novels. Lovelace is no doubt among other things the product of Richardson’s own writerly guilt. He represents the pleasurable self-indulgence which you are forced to sacrifice in the name of truth and justice; and these delights are made alluring in Lovelace in order to show that rejecting them really is a sacrifice. Richardson is that most virtuous of puritans, one who has a lively appreciation of vice. He could not have created Lovelace otherwise. Simply to be able to think Lovelace’s thoughts, however censoriously, puts Richardson beyond the decorous limits of Clarissa, who could do no such thing.

Even so, it is testimony to the importance of truth and justice that one must write off the enticements of writerly pleasure, even if the result is an unavoidable sense of dullness. ‘I laboured hard to rein in my invention’, Richardson comments of *Pamela*, *Part II*, an odd remark for an imaginative writer. All one can add, reading this drearily moralistic work, is that he certainly succeeded. It is as though a chef were to boast that he had gone to heroic lengths to make his soup taste insipid. Yet how can a man who turns out Clarissa, a novel of almost one million words and by far the longest in English literature, be said to be moderate and judicious? Lovelace has been estimated to have written some 14,000 words in a single day, which would hardly have left him much time for erotic adventures. The very insistence and excess with which Richardson advocates the sober, temperate middle-class virtues threatens to undercut them.

Just as Lovelace’s exuberant, mercurial language is a threat to Clarissa’s integrity, so in a different way is her own devotion to truth. How is a woman to be true to her feelings without falling prey to exploitation? How can you tell the truth in a society as vicious as this without it being used to destroy you? For Richardson, as for Jane Austen later, it is a question of balancing candour and truthfulness with reticence and decorum. Reticence and decorum are natural to virtue, but they can always be travestied as haughtiness and prudery. Perhaps social life demands a certain amount of duplicity—but how is this to be distinguished from the frigid artifice of aristocratic culture?

There is also a problem of drawing a line between a lack of candour which is socially and morally necessary, and the artfulness of a Pamela. It is not true that Pamela is, in Mr B.’s words, a ‘saucebox’ and a ‘hypocrite’, but neither is it true that her thoughts are innocent. The fact that an unprotected maidservant needs to keep a wary eye on her virginity makes such innocence impossible. Pamela does indeed make a fetish of her chastity, but it is the culture of patriarchy which is ultimately responsible for this. She is forced to treat herself as a sexual object in order to avoid being treated as one by others. She is ‘pert’ and devious, with a quick strategic eye to her own interests; but her ‘sauce’ and impudence are among other things a spirited defiance of upper-class authority. We are allowed to see that Pamela may well be ‘unconsciously scheming’, as William Empson put it, [3] but that she also needs to look sharp for herself. Besides, in a striking innovation, the lively, racy language in which she expresses herself is the speech of the common people, placed here at the centre of ‘polite letters’ almost for the first time. We have heard something of this idiom in Defoe, but with much less spice and texture.

This, however, is only one of the languages of *Pamela*. The other is a colourless, sententious kind of discourse, which is hard to reconcile with the language of spontaneous feeling. Pamela is sometimes made to speak as no actual maidservant would, which is one indication that Richardson’s writing is not full-blown realism. A polite, formal language is at work trying to ‘normalize’ and regulate the salty colloquialisms of common speech; but the two idioms do not yet sit comfortably together, as they will by the time of George Eliot. The racy, rebellious, Pamela-like side of Richardson is not quite at one with Richardson the middle-class moralist, any more than the speech of Lovelace is at one with that of Clarissa.

To write a novel, you need both Lovelace and Clarissa: both spirit and order, imagination and control. But they are not easy to reconcile, not least when your ideas of order and control are too rigorous. In both of Richardson’s major novels, order and control win out over licence and excess; but the paradox of Clarissa is that they do so in ways which demand an extraordinary imaginative licence on the part of the novel itself. In *Pamela*, we are witnesses to the gradual incorporation of popular experience into the domain of high literature. But by the end of the novel, its strains of farce, festivity and sheer cheek have been more or less neutralized by polite society. Pamela herself is elevated into the gentry, to become a docile housewife mouthing moral platitudes, and her language sinks beneath Richardson’s own. The lower middle classes have suppressed their social resentment and made their peace with their superiors.

There is another reason, however,why these novels are not like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Washington Square*. Realism in Richardson’s work co-exists with fable, fairy tale, allegory, polemic, propaganda, moral homily, spiritual autobiography. Nobody capable of perpetrating *Pamela*, *Part II* can possibly have thought of his art along the realist lines of a Jane Austen. The fact that these various literary forms are not tightly unified is neither here nor there; the very idea of a tighly unified text belongs to a later phase of the novel. Richardson is not in the business of producing seamless works of art; on the contrary, his novels are best thought of as kits, great unwieldy containers crammed with spare parts and agreeable extras, which come complete with detachable appendices, addenda, ‘restorations’, revised passages and moralistic tables of contents. They are the work of a superb literary artist who would have found the whole concept of literary art strange and rather suspect.

Richardson is writing among other things as a champion of an aggressively emerging Protestant middle class; and this means that his writing is necessarily didactic. It cannot afford to conceal its moral values altogether beneath a cloak of realism. Those who disapprove of art which openly seeks to influence its audience—which is to say, almost all literary critics nowadays—are usually those whose own values have been widely accepted and need no noisy promoting. Such critics find ‘preaching’ distasteful, yet value the sermon as a literary form. As a good Protestant, Richardson saw nothing wrong with preaching. It was only when the middle-class values he promoted became more widespread that the novel was able to stop being explicitly moralistic, and could crystallize into its modern non-didactic form. Before then, however, there was a vital job to be done in campaigning for those militant middle-class values—and this meant challenging the profligate aristocracy, singing the praises of peace, sobriety, hard work and connubial love, and elevating the individual to highly privileged status. In these and other ways, Richardson was a true spiritual son of the greatest of all English literary puritans, John Milton.

All this might equally be described as a feminizing of values. The aristocracy’s macho obsession with honour and military heroism was to give way to the meek, modest, pacific virtues. Dominance and arrogance would yield to civility and sensibility. Pity, pathos and benevolence were becoming more fashionable than the brawling and duelling of rough-neck noblemen. The middle classes, with the bloody sectarian conflict of the previous century still fresh in their memory, desired nothing more than a stable, peaceable environment in which to pursue their unheroic purpose of making as much money as they possibly could. Richardson’s novels did not just reflect this ideological campaign; they were crucial weapons in it. His works helped to reform morals and manners, and to forge a cultural identity for the middle class.

To measure the astonishing social impact of these novels, we would have to compare them to the most popular films or TV soap operas of our time. The modern equivalent of *Pamela* or *Clarissa* would not be *Mrs Dalloway* but *Harry Potter*. Richardson’s characters became public property and household names, swooned over, reviled, dramatized, pirated, turned into bawdy rhymes, quoted in the salons and solemnly commended from the pulpit. Like the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, they were multimedia affairs, converted into plays, operas, spoofs, waxworks, domestic commodities. Like all mythical figures, *Pamela* and *Clarissa* occupied some shadowy borderland between fiction and reality, at once more and less real than the world around them.

In fact, the mythical or fairy-tale qualities of these intricately realist novels are fairly obvious. *Pamela* is a Cinderella-like wish-fulfilment in which abduction and imprisonment turn out miraculously well, the rough beast becomes a Prince Charming, and the poor kitchen maid a beautiful princess. As in a cartoon there are horrendous dangers, but the heroine turns out to be gratifyingly unkillable. The novel ends up as a sickly celebration of male power, as its heroine is married off and brought to heel; but it has a utopian dimension as well, in the belief that the most inconspicuous serving maid can be as valuable as her superiors. Like Fielding, Richardson has to square the need for social hierarchy with what seems its pointless artifice. (His egalitarianism had its limits, however: the cast list of his novel *Sir Charles Grandison* is divided into ‘Men, Women, and Italians’).

*Pamela*, then, turns the ugly battles of class and gender into a comedy. In allowing Pamela her victory, the novel reflects the growing confidence of the socially aspiring groups who are dear to its author’s heart. Richardson himself rose from being a lowly printer’s apprentice to becoming a revered name in the ears of Goethe, Rousseau and Napoleon, and did so partly by writing about a domestic servant who becomes a fine lady. But scarcely had he concluded this pact with the rich and powerful than he tore it apart in *Clarissa*. Myth and folk-tale lurk within *Clarissa* too, as the story of a persecuted maiden; but it is also one of the rare English novels to be published before the end of the nineteenth century which is a full-blooded tragedy.

No less than one third of the work is devoted to Clarissa’s death, a fact which prompted even the admiring Samuel Johnson to remark that the heroine was ‘an unconscionable time a-dying’. But that is the point. In its unflinching realism, the novel spares us none of the torment of its violated, victimized protagonist—and, more to the point, spares her violators none of it either. Clarissa does not crawl away to die in a corner; instead, she *performs* her death, turning her body into a symbol and her dying into public theatre. If there is masochism and morbidity in this act, there is also a kind of martyrdom. If it is realist in its detail, it is superbly, defiantly implausible as a whole.

Clarissa represents an astonishing act of rebellion against the whole social system—patriarchy, upper-class licence, middle-class individualism—on the part of a solitary young woman whom that system has hounded to death. The critic Ian Watt comments that Clarissa ‘dies rather than recognise the flesh’, [4] but the truth is that she dies because she recognizes it only too well. What makes this act of absolute refusal even more potent is the fact that the woman who performs it is no revolutionary but a dutiful servant of the culture which destroys her. Deliberately withdrawing her body from circulation, Clarissa succeeds, Samson-like, in confounding her enemies, bringing them low by her own self-immolation. She is a forerunner of those Henry James heroines who vanquish by turning their faces to the wall. Closing his ears to the clamours of those readers who begged him to let his heroine live, Richardson knew that realism demanded that she die. Only in such a death could the truth of this exploitative social order be put on public view.

It is a truth which even goes beyond the opinions of the book’s author. Richardson believed that ‘men and women are brothers and sisters; they are not of different species’. Most of his closest critics and collaborators were women. He held that marriage should mean companionship rather than female slavery, and that women should be educated. On the other hand, he thought them good for nothing if they neglected their domestic duties, and denied that they should be independent of their husbands. As often happens with writers, the imaginative truth of his novel exceeded his own real-life beliefs. Many critics have responded to his heroine by defaming her. *Clarissa* has been pilloried as morbid, naive, narcissistic, self-pitying, self-deluded, masochistic and—from a woman critic—‘a ripe temptation to violence’, [5] meaning that she deserves what she gets. Richardson himself has been just as roughly handled. ‘His mind is so very vile a mind’, wrote Coleridge, ‘so oozy, so hypocritical, praise-mad, canting, envious, concupiscent’.

Clarissa is indeed a flawed character, prone to self-deception and moral self-admiration. ‘So desirous to be considered *an example*!’, as she herself mocks her own moral vanity. She can be irritatingly inflexible and exasperatingly perverse. Yet perhaps what some critics cannot really stomach is the fact that Richardson seems here to have pulled off the impossible, creating a character who is at once deeply virtuous and grippingly real. If she had understood herself better, and if Lovelace had not been so deeply in the grip of a false ideology, it is possible that they could have enjoyed a genuine relationship. Yet if the novel is a tragedy, it is because it is concerned not simply with the fate of a single couple, but with the nature of relationships in a false society. And that makes it more realist, not less.

### Notes

[…]

2. Judith Wilt, ‘He Could Go No Farther: A Modest Proposal About Lovelace and Clarissa’, *PMLA*

(1977), 92(1): 19–32..

3. Empson in ‘Tom Jones,’ The Kenyon Review (1958), 20, p. 238.

4. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Harmondworth, UK: Penguin, 1966), p. 247.

5. Dorothy van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Rinehart, 1961), p. 45.