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Chapter 3: Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson

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 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 Richardson'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 jocosely 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 be 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 innocents 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.

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 tightly 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

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.
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.