

MAIN LINES OF CRITICISM OF FIELDING'S *TOM JONES*, 1900-1978 GEORGE HAHN

Except when questions of its morality got in the way of dispassionate criticism, as they did for Richardson, Johnson, and Hawkins, *Tom Jones* has continually been recognized as a masterpiece of design. As early as 1834 such an acute critic as Coleridge praised the novel, grouping it with the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the *Alchemist* as "the three most perfect plots ever planned."¹ Basing his remarks on the book's construction and characterization, Byron termed Fielding "the prose Homer of Human Nature."² Scott envied Fielding the book's meticulous construction,³ and Thackeray and the Victorians, though protesting its morality, deemed it a masterpiece of fiction.⁴ The great superlative of the twentieth century was written by Wilbur Cross, who called *Tom Jones* "The *Hamlet* of English fiction."⁵ Thus the novel moved into this century largely free of the problems attached to Fielding's other works. Unlike the plays, it was regarded as "serious literature." Unlike *Shamela*, there were no problems of authorship or protests against overt vulgarity. Unlike *Joseph Andrews*, its design and morality did not have to be established. And unlike *Amelia*, it was not victimized by a debate still unsettled, on Fielding's intentions, philosophy, and merit as a narrator. Consequently, the dominant business of recent criticism of *Tom Jones* has been formalistic, the observation of refinements and their integration in a novel considered virtually flawless. There are dissents, but for the most part, they are not based on critical grounds, for the demurrers center on a preference for the Richardsonian over the Fieldingesque novel, a preference exhibited most prominently by F. R. Leavis, Frank Kermode, and Ian Watt.⁶

Overwhelmingly, too, this criticism has swelled in the 1960s and 1970s. Excluding foreign work and dissertations, the items devoted in whole or substantial part to *Tom Jones* total one hundred and seventy.⁷ Of these, fifty-five, or 32 percent, were produced in the 1960s and sixty, or 35 percent through mid-1978. Thus 67 percent of the critical attention to *Tom Jones* has appeared in the past eighteen years, while in the first six decades of this century, only fifty-five such items, or 32 percent, were produced. Many of those were not critical, consisting of factual notes on dates, publication figures, and identification of places and persons in the novel. This recent mass of criticism can more readily be surveyed topically than chronologically. The topics are design (including work on the digressions), the narrator and narrative technique, characterization, and irony and language; even most of the studies concerning politics and ethics ultimately become formalistic matters, as do the most current contextual studies of Fielding and his culture.

The great refinements on Coleridge's perception of the plot of *Tom Jones* began in the 1950s when critics began laying to rest Thornbury's 1931 designation of the Fielding novel as epic.⁸ In 1953 Dorothy Van Ghent reduced the epic ascription to structure and total architecture.⁹ In 1957 Watt discounted the epic influence on Fielding, claiming that while it is apparent in some small effects – depiction of a social panorama, surprise, and mock-heroic touches – Fielding puts the epic parallel to use only to enlist prestige for his work.¹⁰ And in the next year, E. M. W. Tillyard concurred that *Tom Jones* is not essentially epic, for though it is thoroughly national, it reflects only the manners and not the spirit of its time, and its main character is more a knight errant than a great hero.¹¹ The impact of these three studies was to reveal a Fielding far less dependent on a hollow classical vessel into which he poured contemporary materials.

In 1960 Sheridan Baker did note the similarities in language, characters, and motifs between *Tom Jones* and the French romances. But he ultimately distinguished them to show that Fielding ultimately mocks the staples of the traditional type: courtly love and heroic adventure.¹²

The most recent and thorough study to argue for the importance of a traditional form is Henry Knight Miller's 1976 monograph, *Henry Fielding's "Tom Jones" and the Romance Tradition*,¹³ which claims that judgments about the novel based on modern concepts of realism can distort understanding of it. Through five closely analytical chapters Miller "decodes" *Tom Jones* as a romance in its mythos, temporal and spatial aspects, people, ethos, and logos. It is a brilliant but lonely contention.

Instead, under the formalistic influence that was becoming the standard medium of interpretation in the 1950s, attention was directed more to the inherent rather than the generic qualities of the novel's design. And two essays determined the dual course that critical discussion of the design of *Tom Jones* would thereafter take: Dorothy Van Ghent established the view toward what may be called static design, while R. S. Crane first articulated the criticism of the dynamic construction of the novel.

Van Ghent's 1953 essay, "On *Tom Jones*," depicted the novel as "a complex architectural figure, a Palladian palace perhaps."¹⁴ She outlines its structural principles by calling attention to its systematic organization of contrasts – of characters, of scenes, of verbal relationships – presided over by a benevolent and omniscient narrator whose thorough control bespoke a spirit of permanence and order. Noticing these features, she shows how Fielding fused them in the "comic curve" of Tom's move from low to high fortune. This comic curve or plot movement, she argues, embodies a meaning of life "conceived specifically as a conflict between natural instinctive feeling, and those appearances with which people disguise, deny, or inhibit natural feeling."¹⁵ In structure, character, and theme, then, Van Ghent reveals Fielding's mastery of form by the novel's inner organic tensions.

The influence of this essay has continued to the present. In 1959 James J. Lynch extended Van Ghent's observation to produce a full review of the techniques of *Tom Jones*'s architectonic precision.¹⁶ He first surveys Fielding's larger techniques of plot division, temporal and spatial verisimilitude, and parallelism. Then he explains the smaller techniques such as the planned appearance, the undisclosed motive, the blurred consequence. Lynch shows that as the larger elements established an ordering of narration, the smaller ones effect tight causal relationships. Also under the aegis of Van Ghent was Maurice Johnson, who in 1961 observed some more of the "minute wheels" of rhetorical and symbolic devices that contribute to the novel's "system of action," such as the recurring food-love analogy, the cycle of clothes motifs, a pattern of "bitch" references, and the recurring symbolism of Sophia's muff.¹⁷

This criticism that focused on the readily perceivable objective design in Fielding's novel was prominently displayed in 1968 in studies by Alter and Hilles. In two chapters of his *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel*,¹⁸ Robert Alter explains that the balances and antitheses that Van Ghent and Lynch outlined did indeed control the novel but that this main effect was to create a conscious artifice that distanced the reader properly to allow his moral judgments of the actions in the plot. Alter thus shows that artifice and contrivance were merits rather than flaws of the design. Indeed, contrivance is the main theme of Frederick W. Hilles's *Festschrift* essay in which he issues a broadside attack on Watt and others, who had demeaned Fielding's conscious design.¹⁹ Hilles rearticulates Alter's point that the contrived artifice of symmetrical design keeps the reader detached so that he can see and judge clearly. The intricate design, Hilles concludes, is an appeal to the literate reader who enjoys the artifice that focuses his serious intentions. A special feature of Hilles's essay is a diagram of the tripartite pattern of *Tom Jones* that reveals its many parallels, oppositions, and recurrences.

In 1970, Martin Battestin's "*Tom Jones: The Argument of Design*" extended Fielding's symmetries beyond the technical to the thematic.²⁰ Calling *Tom Jones* the consummate achievement of the Augustan Age because of its superb design, Battestin identifies the symbolic value in that design, for he shows it to be an artistic analogue to the design of God in the universe. Thus he concludes that a main theme of Providence stands as cause and effect of the design, an emblem of Fielding's coherent and Christian view of life.

Such works as Alter's, Hilles's, and Battestin's, themselves refining Van Ghent's observations on *Tom Jones*'s larger structure and Johnson's on its smaller designs, prompted more efforts to discover design. As to the larger elements, J. Paul Hunter in 1972 explained the importance of the journey motif²¹ and Roger Robinson detailed the "rococo" design of calculated digressiveness and themes off the main plot that eventually wind back into it.²² In the same year Douglas Brooks perceived an intricate numerological pattern in the novel based, he says, on Shaftesburian Platonism.²³ As to smaller details of design, a number of critics have explained single scenes as rich epitomes of the novel. Eleanor Hutchens called attention to the bird adventure (IV, 3, 4) in which every major attitude of the novel is announced.²⁴ She also noted the geometric and thematic implications of the philosopher Square in the triangle of Molly's attic.²⁵ And Battestin explained the emblematic nature of the scene at Mazard Hill midway in Tom's journey²⁶ and the political parable of the Gypsy episode (XII, 11, 12).²⁷ Numerous critics as well have recognized the parallels between the Man of the Hill's story and Toro's and between Mrs. Fitzpatrick's and Sophia's.

These essays, following Van Ghent, stressed the static and immediately observable elements in Fielding's design. But a second movement, initiated in 1950 by R. S. Crane's "Plot of *Tom Jones*"²⁸ focused on the more dynamic elements of structure. In this landmark essay Crane rejects the description of the plot of the novel as a mere enveloping form, an assumption made by some recent critics (such as Hilles as we have just seen). Instead, recalling the Aristotelian definition of plot as the fusion of action, character, and thought, he shows that the plot of *Tom Jones* most emphasized action. But mainly he specifies that its dynamics are keyed to the reader's "emotionalized expectation" about Tom, expectations which Fielding provokes by hints and

sympathies that make his hero's fortune probable. Drawing Fielding into the plot by virtue of his rhetorical skills and the reader by virtue of his sympathy for Tom, Crane stresses a unity of character, story, narrator, and reader.

Crane's essay made criticism more aware of the author and the reader as involved in an exchange, the sending and receiving of rhetorical signals. Hence the implications of Fielding's structure moved far beyond the depiction of stable juxtapositions and parallels to the description of a discourse. In 1961 Crane's Chicago colleague Wayne Booth, for example, showed how Fielding's "implied author," the dramatic version of himself, fashions an intimacy with the reader that virtually becomes a subplot. Under the narrator's wise and comic guidance, Booth notes, "our growing intimacy with Fielding's dramatic version of himself produces a kind of comic analogue of the true believer's reliance on a providence in real life."²⁹ As Crane had demonstrated the relationship between Tom and the reader, Booth calls attention first to the almost direct relationship between the narrator and the reader via the narrator's intrusive commentary. And second he notes the agreement between the essential moral views of Tom and of the narrator, mainly, for example, the reliance on the good heart. In these ways, then, Booth too shows that the Aristotelian requisite of "thought" emanates from the narrative structure.

In 1964 a third Chicago critic, Sheldon Sacks, extended the studies of Crane and Booth to analyze the techniques of Fielding's rhetoric of fiction.³⁰ Sacks found seven recurrent classes of "signals" by which Fielding conveyed his ideas to the reader: (1) the "split commentator" who both narrates and criticizes; (2) the "fallible paragon" who represents a positive ethical norm but who errs in judgment (e.g., Allworthy); (3) the "nondiscursive female paragon" who is often the object of value judgments (e.g., Sophia); (4) the species characters and "walking concepts" who are labeled for our evaluation (e.g., Supple); (5) the male hero testing and being tested by modes of belief and behavior; (6) the narrator of digressive tales who expounds formulated ideas (e.g., the Man of the Hill); and (7) the character who has important value judgments made about him but who does not evaluate others (e.g., Jenny Jones).

Because of the cogency of the rhetorical perspective of these critics, by 1975 attention to the dynamics of Fielding's structure challenged that to its static design. And in the main the new attention was on both the narrator and his reader. What Booth had cautiously termed a subplot – the narrator-reader relationship – had eclipsed Fielding's story about Tom and Sophia.

In 1970, for example, Leo Braudy showed how in *Tom Jones* the pure pattern of design and the spontaneous narrative style merged into a distinctive historiography.³¹ The next year Franz Stanzel felt the narrator's presence so compelling that he labeled *Tom Jones* an "authorial novel" and claimed that the real credibility of the novel is achieved by the narrator's intrusive presence. He further suggests that Fielding "symbolizes the epistemological view ... that we do not apprehend the world as it is in itself, but as it has passed through the medium of an observing mind."³² Thus Stanzel brought the question of the narrator's role full cycle since Lubbock's dismissal of him in 1921 in favor of point of view, of "showing" rather than "telling." Lubbock's view was last stated in 1972 by David Goldknopf, who saw the plot of *Tom Jones* as a failure largely because the narrator's commentary dissipates its energy. No doubt with a wry glance at Booth, Goldknopf suggests that the only camaraderie between Fielding and his reader "is founded on the shared attitude of condescension toward the [callow] narrative."³³

Nevertheless, acknowledgment of the importance of the narrative presence continued. In 1974 James Vopat extended Stanzel's epistemological definition of that presence by stressing the narrator's control of fictional events and historical time that alone allows the readers to comprehend the reality of the events.³⁴ In 1976 Patricia Meyer Spacks noted Fielding's presentation of Tom's imaginative entrance into the situation of others to show the narrator's theory of self-knowledge, as he himself enters imaginatively into the character of Tom on his own mission of self-discovery.³⁵ And in 1978 Thomas Lockwood visualized *Tom Jones* as a mental autobiography of its narrator, thereby registering a claim for Fielding's influence on *Tristram Shandy*.³⁶

As these studies diverted attention from Tom's story to the narrator, others inspired by the Chicago critics turned to the reader's role in the novel. These may be seen to have their roots in Booth's 1952 article, "The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction before *Tristram Shandy*,"³⁷ which distinguished between what Sherbo in 1969 called "inside" and "outside" readers: "The 'outside' reader ... is invited by the author to look upon the 'inside' reader reading the book ... just as he ... is invited by the author to look upon the narrator in his little parlor or at his writing desk."³⁸ This Chinese-box situation is similar to the two sets of audience and actors in Fielding's rehearsal plays and extends the range

of Fielding's rhetoric. An equally perceptive account was given in 1970 by Henry Knight Miller in his classification of such "inside" readers in *Tom Jones*.³⁹

The implications of the discovery of this newly discovered character, the reader, were revealed by John Preston that same year.⁴⁰ He offers a direct alternative to Lockwood's designating the narrator as main character by suggesting the reader for that distinction. By regarding Tom's plot as a medium that records puzzling motives and happenings, Preston sees the experience of reading the novel as epistemological, for it presents its reader with the opportunity to make a number of subjective judgments based on the accuracy of his perceptions of events and characters. Two years later Howard Anderson acknowledged the importance of the reader's role but suggested that the narrator worked to establish a mutuality of purpose with his reader.⁴¹ And in 1974 Wolfgang Iser also stressed the narrator's guidance but he insisted that the reader's perceptions finally commanded the meaning and were the central interest of *Tom Jones*.⁴²

Because of the intensity of concern with what once was thought to be if not obtrusive, then peripheral, the narrator's comments to his reader became central. A necessary corollary issue thus concerned the voice of the narrator. William Empson in 1958 perhaps helped lay some groundwork for the preceding concern about the reader's role, for he showed that Fielding's "double irony" allows the reader and narrator to feel sympathy for two philosophies at once.⁴³ For instance, the concept of honor in the novel is relativistic because different characters offer different versions of it. This relativity defines for Empson the moral stance of the novel as humanist and liberal in that the reader is free to choose and judge moral positions by direct observation of contrasts rather than by a superimposed orthodoxy, whether classical or Christian. C. J. Rawson demurred a year later, claiming that Empson's reading made Fielding morally evasive.⁴⁴

But in the mid 1960s three accounts shifted the grounds of discussion from irony as a moral expression to irony as an index of Fielding's own comic and benevolent constitution. Irvin Ehrenpreis in 1964 suggested that Fielding's humor derived from his perception of "man's glorious power to entertain the most violently opposed doctrines at the same time without apparent discomfort."⁴⁵ For example, the thoroughly English Squire Western incongruously toasts a Frenchified king and his Whiggishly libertarian sister is incongruously dazzled by the peerage. Implying an "irony of reconciliation," Ehrenpreis suggests that "the essence of Fielding's hopefulness lies in his belief that all the genuine impulses of a good man are compatible with one another."⁴⁶ And in 1965 A. E. Dyson held that because Fielding's primary instinct is not satiric but comic, in *Tom Jones* he "lacks the misanthropy to carry off the disgust which he must frequently profess to feel."⁴⁷ Consequently, Dyson concludes that Fielding's satiric verbal irony, directed at local episodes, is finally submerged by the gentler situational irony of comedy. This very notion of Fielding's cheerful contemplation and presentation of a comic world is Andrew Wright's thesis in his study of 1965, *Henry Fielding: Mask and Feast* and of Susan Auty's 1975 *The Comic Spirit of Eighteenth-Century Novels*.⁴⁸

The major study of the irony was produced in 1965 by Eleanor Newman Hutchens. *Irony in "Tom Jones"* is mainly an examination of connotative irony that, Hutchens believes, reflects Fielding's moral-comic view. She defines irony as "the sport of bringing about a conclusion by indicating its opposite."⁴⁹ Her central chapters discuss his mastery of the two basic methods, substantial irony (achieved through action, statement, or symbol) and verbal irony (effected by the choice and arrangements of words).

"Substance," Chapter III, is a seemingly exhaustive catalogue of the larger ironies of *Tom Jones* for example, ironies of plot, character, reader's perceptions, and symbols (e.g., Sophia's muff as symbolic of both union and disunion). Hutchens's analysis of the bird adventure (IV, 3 and 4) illustrates the workings of these various types of substantial irony so that she labels the episode "*Tom Jones* in miniature, with all its ironies concentrated."⁵⁰ The remainder of this book consists of Hutchens's discussion of verbal irony.

Not only the most thorough analysis of the question of irony, Hutchens's book reconciled some of the chief critical stands on it. She showed how Fielding not only asserted a moral position, as Rawson had argued, but also how its assertion emanated from fine gradations of tone that Empson had called relativistic. Moreover, if she revealed how Fielding's connotative irony implied his moral position, she showed how his denotative and referential ironies were varied enough for both comic and satiric colorings.

Still, other analyses of *Tom Jones*'s irony appeared after Hutchens's book. One of the best was Glenn W. Hatfield's, which refines Hutchens's reading of the bird scene by noting that ironic meanings receive their signification in

dramatic acts.⁵¹ Worthwhile also is Eugene Paul Nassar's 1970 essay "Complex Irony in *Tom Jones*," which cogently reconstituted Empson's interpretation.⁵² Nassar holds that the narrator views his characters both sentimentally and skeptically. Thus Bridget is both good-natured but prudishly hypocritical, Western loving yet egotistical, Mrs. Fitzpatrick mistreated but intriguing, and the narrator himself variously dull and witty. Nassar's conclusion that Fielding's irony becomes a "drama of irresolution" between the skeptical and the sentimental, however, may be turned to Fielding's credit simply by calling him competent in characterization rather than irresolute in intention.

Besides the ironic tone of the narrator, his diction in general has attracted critical attention. Leonard Lutwack in 1960 discriminated three prose styles in *Tom Jones*: the "plain" for storytelling, the "Homerian" for parodic effects, and the formal for commentary.⁵³ Ten years later Henry Knight Miller differentiated still more subtly among seven voices of Fielding's narrator: the voices of humor; of poetical and moral elevation; of Homeric epic; of medical, legal, and hunting jargons; and of his "hypothetical readers," the Institutional Moralist and the Impressionable Young Lady (the skeptic and the sentimentalist).⁵⁴ And Philip Stevick suggested that Fielding's conversational commentary was an epistemological exercise for the reader in coming to know and judge human experience.⁵⁵

The language of *Tom Jones*'s characters also has been scrutinized. In 1965 Henry Lavin suggested that the frequent abstract and Latinate speeches of Allworthy, Sophia, and Tom reflect Fielding's ethical purpose that itself demands a dignified diction.⁵⁶ Lavin concedes its undermining of realism but argues that Fielding's interest is not in art but in recommending goodness. In 1965, Henry Knight Miller explained the polemical abilities of the characters.⁵⁷ And Michael Bell in 1970 made an exacting analysis of Tom's proposal to Sophia to define it as a sportive ritual by which the lovers, in artificial, agreed-upon diction, reveal their true feelings. But the best individual discussion of Fielding's rendering of speech in *Tom Jones* is Alfred McDowell's, which explains his use of "free indirect speech" – the lexical, syntactical, and punctuational methods by which he transforms direct into indirect speech.⁵⁸ McDowell concludes that this conversion in fact allows greater dramatic effect because the integration of the narrator's reproduction of the characters' speeches with his own commentary sets the stage, controls the characters, and focuses the satirical aside of the rehearsal format.

Yet criticism has debated the relevance of two voices in *Tom Jones*: the narrator's in his eighteen prefatory chapters and the Man of the Hill's. As to the prefaces, the general conclusion earlier in the century was that they were obtrusive, an alien line cutting across the narrative grain of the book. Fielding himself had considered them as prologues to a play and as serious foils to a light narrative. But modern criticism saw them as impediments to unity. Thornbury⁵⁹ and Bissell⁶⁰ regarded them in the 1930s as mere repositories of critical lore, interesting only in themselves. In 1947 Somerset Maugham regarded them as hindrances and removed them from his abridged edition of the novel.⁶¹ But the most stinging comment had been uttered nine years earlier by another novelist, E. M. Forster, who saw the prefaces as meditative exercises that "make detestable reading – horrid little leathern receptacles that lead nowhere and keep us from the gaiety, bustle, and decent carnality that make up the rest of the novel."⁶² Only in 1963 was it suggested that the prefaces might bear a relationship to the narrative proper. In that year Michael Bliss ventured to say that in them Fielding involves his reader in the book's "moral universe" which is "located in and around the concept of mutuality."⁶³ He claimed that as Fielding establishes his own empathy with Tom, the reader develops an empathy for both because of their good-heartedness. Ten years later, F. Kaplan submitted a claim that the prefaces maintained their own "plot," the self-conscious theme of which is the act of composing the novel and the conflict which centers on the demands of narrative realism as opposed to the claims of artifice.⁶⁴ The critically inevitable had occurred: the expository had become narrative.

The "interpolated tale" of the Man of the Hill as well has occasioned a small critical literature. In 1900 Austin Dobson dismissed it as "an inexplicable stumbling block"⁶⁵ and as late as 1952 F. H. Dudden called it "at best a superfluity."⁶⁶ These opinions, in fact, were representative of those appearing in the literary histories of the first half century. But in 1936 occurred the first shift in this general opinion, when Ernest Baker, though dismissing it himself as an "entertaining excrescence," recognized the tale as a parable of Tom's life.⁶⁷

Assuming Baker's parabolic reading, in 1950 R. S. Crane interpreted the Man of the Hill's tale as a "negative analogy" to reduce the reader's worry concerning Tom's future actions.⁶⁸ William Empson went further, when in 1958 he suggested that the tale, in its discussion of stoicism and benevolence, formed part of the structure of the novel's ethical thought.⁶⁹ In an article three years later, Earl Tannebaum agreed on the analogies between the Old Man's and Tom's lives but asserted that the novel's main moral lesson is apparent in their final

dissimilarity: the Old Man thinks mankind to be evil and corrupt, while Tom believes it to be basically good.⁷⁰ By 1968 Manuel Schonhorn could view the episode of the tale as an example of Fielding's consummate artistry for three reasons.⁷¹ Schonhorn claimed that it parodies the Wilson tale of *Joseph Andrews*, that it forms the structural and philosophic core of the novel by its comparison with Tom and the Old Man, and that it illustrates Fielding's use of epic convention to control picaresque looseness in its allusion to Aeneas's descent to the Underworld. But two of Schonhorn's reasons are puzzling. Why would Fielding want to parody his own tale of Wilson? And how would a hilltop episode approximate a descent to the Underworld? Frederick W. Hilles in the same year came far closer to illustrating Fielding's artistry by graphically diagramming how the episode balanced that of Mrs. Fitzpatrick's narration as incidents flanking the climactic scene at the Upton Inn.⁷² Hilles made it clear that each, respectively, is an allegory of the life of Tom and Sophia at the midpoint of the novel. Jerome Mandel in 1969 suggested that the logical narrative of the Old Man and the digressive one of Mrs. Fitzpatrick were Fielding's conscious parodies of two traits of his own style.⁷³ But the most astute analysis of the subject was by Henry Knight Miller, who showed that the "digressive tales" of the Man of the Hill and Mrs. Fitzpatrick are not at all digressive. Miller argues that they present to Tom and Sophia very real temptations: to doubt others and to attribute all to fortune. Both tales also imply to the youths that "maturity is not worth the achieving." Thus, Miller concludes, they represent obstacles, such as those encountered in the romance tradition, to the rite de passage to maturity.⁷⁴ As with that on the prefatory chapters, the criticism of the Man of the Hill's tale had come full cycle. Even the critical imagery applied to the tale is instructive, from the "stumbling block" and "excrecence" of Dobson and Baker to the "philosophical core" of Schonhorn and an element in the rite de passage of Miller.

Another topic of critical concern in *Tom Jones* is characterization. Eclipsed critically by interest in structural design and narrative techniques, the topic suffers perhaps from a silent concession by the critics to the work of psychological realism as practiced by Fielding's rival Richardson. Indeed, the criticism that does justify Fielding's characterization reveals an undercurrent of peevishness that Fielding's technique has been misjudged because of a contemporary preference for realism.

Serious fault with Fielding's characterization ranged from 1919 to 1957 and rests on one basic premise: its superficiality. In 1919 Robert Sherman Loomis disparaged Fielding's characters as "cardboard."⁷⁵ Loomis charges that they wear their motives prominently and that, taken together, they form an eighteenth-century allegorical tableau. By 1957, Watt was the last critic of note to diminish Fielding's characterization. Claiming that Fielding's preference for the Aristotelian preoccupation with stable and nondeveloping human nature inhibited his sense of a developmental character, Watt suggests that Fielding's characters were made to emerge by narrative comment. Lacking demonstrable self-change, the characters could not, as could Richardson's, be psychologically realistic.⁷⁶ Between Loomis and Watt, the literary histories and studies of Richardson axiomatically assumed Fielding's inferiority in producing realistic characters.

Cross, of course, with his cartoon of the milktoast Richardson in the background, had praised Fielding's skill at endowing a real-life model with traits imaginary and actual to achieve a lively character with mythic resonance.⁷⁷ Cross's method reveals his subscription to the nineteenth-century Salisbury school, a system of finding the originals of the characters in Fielding's West country. In effect, he argues that Fielding's characters were realistic because they were real.

This kind of biographical justification fought a lonely action against Richardsonian proponents with help only from Aurélien Digeon, who in 1925 stressed Fielding's ability to reveal psychological motive through action, as, for example, Tom's actions on behalf of birds, strumpets, and perfidious gamekeepers, inter alia manifest his good-heartedness.⁷⁸ Ernest Baker continued this notion eleven years later by explaining Fielding's ironic analysis of motive, showing that it was made possible by the narrator's omniscience in imputing the possibility of base causes to apparently good actions and speeches.⁷⁹ Still, Digeon and Baker were contesting Richardson on his own field of psychological realism and virtually conceding the possibility of an alternative conception of character by Fielding.

In his short introduction to *Tom Jones* Irvin Ehrenpreis in 1964 stated the case forthrightly that "Fielding intends character, rather than language, to be the foundation of his comedy."⁸⁰ The comic element provided the alternative for a justification. As Wright would largely repeat the next year,⁸¹ Ehrenpreis discerned that Fielding's view of life as a masquerade prompted his juxtaposition of the natural and the artificial in *Tom Jones*. Yet he shows that the mask becomes the reality for the character and that the commentary on it is ultimately accurate at revealing motive. Two years later Ronald Paulson pressed Ehrenpreis's notion of characterization by commentary in *Tom Jones* a

step further when he suggested that “every action is analyzed by motive and judged by neighbors or chance acquaintance or enemies, whose own motives, of course, appear in their interpretations.”⁸² This method of using characters as touchstones for one another, implies Paulson, is true realism, for it is the way people actually perceive and judge character.

Alter continued the movement toward asserting the artistry in Fielding’s characterization. In 1968 he explained Fielding’s design of character as a dual technique of dialectic analysis and of moral evaluation. Alter first shows that the function of Fielding’s careful symmetries “is to show forth the relatedness of all the characters to each other and to the novel and social concerns of the novel.”⁸³ Second, he argues that Fielding can get along without psychological analysis by a generalized moral assessment; for example when Fielding tells us that Sophia “felt an agreeable tickling in a certain little passion” about giving herself up to Blifil, he specifies the pleasure of self-righteous grievance with the psychological touch of masochism. Four years later Thomas A. Stumpf restated Alter’s idea in an essay holding that Fielding’s “anti-psychologism,” or unwillingness to enter his characters’ minds, allows him to develop their motives through their actions and his commentary. Stumpf concludes that for Fielding “judicious observation is more important than psychological speculation”⁸⁴ in perceiving motive. In brief, Alter and Stumpf offered an alternative appreciation of Fielding’s characterization not based on first-person psychological realism.

Fielding’s portrayal of single characters has not drawn as much direct notice as has his general method of characterization. Squire Western is universally regarded as the most sharply angled and lively of *Tom Jones*’s characters, but it is Squire Allworthy who is more critically puzzling than all the rest.

Scholarship long ago established that the original of Allworthy is Ralph Allen, philanthropist and benefactor of Fielding. But the problem with Allworthy is his two-dimensional appearance. Indeed, he has been held as a good example of Fielding’s inability to produce a convincing human being. On the one hand critics found fault with his allegorical flatness and on the other with his ineptitude in judging people. Two recent views illustrate this attitude. In 1965 Adrian Roscoe claimed that Fielding purposely made Allworthy into an unrealistic blunderer continually misjudging and punishing people to expose the shortcomings of the country world. Yet Roscoe concludes that if Allworthy is not admirable, he is still “a good man in a particularly bad system... which makes [squires] into small kings...”⁸⁵ Roscoe thus saw Allworthy as a satiric stick with which to beat a social problem. In 1970 Sean Shesgreen, while conceding Allworthy’s flatness, justified it on the grounds that the squire was part of a triad bespeaking a moral purpose.⁸⁶ Shesgreen placed Allworthy’s active sympathy between Thwackum’s stern religion and Square’s love of virtue as a *via media* to the novel’s main ethics of benevolence.

Defenses of Allworthy as a more realistic character were made by Samuel Longmire and George Herman. In 1972, Longmire called Allworthy an artistic achievement by reference to Isaac Barrow’s sermon which held that the charitable man, like Allworthy, accepts human fallibility and is slow to find fault.⁸⁷ But, Longmire notes, Barrow also regards the good man as wary, which Allworthy is not; he is duped by relying more on imputed motives than on actions. By the novel’s end, Allworthy, like Tom, develops prudence and illustrates in his final judgment of Tom a main theme of the standards of good judgment. Perhaps the best view of Allworthy was offered seven years before, however, when George Herman searched the text to establish the squire as a good neighbor, brother, and foster father, and as a charitable, chaste, and devout man as well.⁸⁸ As to Allworthy’s inability to judge people correctly, Herman shows that Fielding gives him good reason to trust the wrong people and sets Tom and him apart to give the squire less opportunity to judge the foundling directly.

Tom’s characterization, too, has attracted notice recently. Some criticism finds that his character becomes more resonant by Fielding’s drawing parallels between it and Oedipus,⁸⁹ Christ and Hamlet,⁹⁰ and, as we have seen, the Man of the Hill. One critic claims that Fielding charts Tom’s progress by reference to games.⁹¹ Another sees that Fielding makes him an emblem of the declining gentry.⁹² Howard O. Brogan suggests that Tom’s character is determined by parental love and passion as well as by human association and that guidance can only orient, but not determine, character.⁹³ In a good discussion of Tom’s characterization, Stanley J. Solomon points to Fielding’s placement of Tom’s virtuous speeches after his ignoble actions to reveal his psychology as well as his development.⁹⁴ That his speeches are in an Allworthian idiom reveals a superego influence reflected in Tom’s final, right actions.

As Solomon explained Fielding’s internal-external method of characterization in reference to Tom, Sheridan Baker offered the best account of Bridget’s characterization, showing how plot generates character.⁹⁵ Distinguishing

between plot (story) and plotting (storytelling), Baker explains how in Bridget the plot demands a passionate lonely woman while the plotting necessitates a comic old maid above suspicion. By concealing her plot traits, Fielding extends the mystery of Tom's mother, while by his plotting he adds to the comedy. Only at the end of the story is she revealed as more than a comic type, for then she is seen as a complex woman – loving, love-starved, motherly, and calculating.

Still, the standard critical thought about the characters as flat has led to a corollary belief that they enable Fielding to make do with a philosophically ironic system. Especially in Tom himself, long thought of as a kind of noble savage spurred to action by a genuinely good heart, the criticism has found a gauge by which to measure humanity. The “philosophy” of the novel that the criticism has noted, then, is neatly paradigmatic with the charitable people opposing the selfish ones. As Martin Price explained it, Fielding's central theme is “the opposition between the flow of soul – of selfless generosity – and the structure-screens, defenses, moats of indifference people build around themselves.”⁹⁶

Of course, the keystone of much of the discussion of the novel's philosophy is Tom's sexual adventuring. Early in the century G. K. Chesterton defended Fielding's theoretical morality by showing his disapproval of Tom's actions.⁹⁷ Later critics such as Murry,⁹⁸ Watt,⁹⁹ and Price¹⁰⁰ also insisted on the book's strong morality, but, unlike Chesterton, defended Tom's libido on various grounds of his times, his youth, and his refusal to seduce – but not to be seduced. Fielding, the more modern criticism implied, was enlightened and aristocratic enough to see sex not as wicked but as amusing. Besides, the criticism continued, Tom's healthy sexuality is a sign of his good and open heart. As early as 1925 Digeon had broadened the moral issue to pronounce that the novel's moral doctrine rested on altruistic feeling – the concern for others and the active working to promote their welfare and relieve their distresses. This feeling Digeon saw incarnate in Tom. André Gide corroborated this point by noticing that Fielding's preference for “spontaneous virtue” leads him to portray piety only in hypocrites.¹⁰¹ Much of this criticism defending Tom as the novel's moral centerpiece is epitomized in Judith G. Stitzel's 1970 article showing that Tom's healthy passion and open generosity comment ethically on Blifil's perverse and insular selfishness.¹⁰²

This highlighting of the modern view of Fielding's central philosophy in *Tom Jones* shows that appreciation of Fielding's ethics is little more than a reconstitution of Sir John Hawkins's gloss on Fielding's morality as “Shaftesbury vulgarized” or “that cant-phrase goodness of heart.” Only two commentators have offered a significantly variant reading, Martin C. Battestin and Bernard Harrison.

In two essays of 1968 and 1970, Battestin recalled the importance of Christianity to Fielding's moral view. Recognizing the prevalence of the idea of prudence in the novel, he specified the ethical use to which Fielding put this cardinal virtue.¹⁰³ As Tom seeks wisdom, emblemized in Sophia, he is exposed to three kinds of ambiguous prudence: practical wisdom, malevolent cunning, and self-protective expediency. In complex characterizations of each type, Fielding provides Tom with object lessons that he must pass through for a graduation to wisdom. In the second essay Battestin demonstrated that providence, emblemized in Fielding's narrative omniscience, allows an ultimate reward for good intentions and the good heart.¹⁰⁴ The reward and punishment system that Fielding establishes in his novel to validate good actions approximates his own faith in the final justice of God. Battestin's studies revealed therefore that Fielding's philosophy centered on more than a vulgar Shaftesburianism.

The second corrective to the modern trend of crystallizing Fielding's morality in a callow “good-heart” philosophy is a compact and exact little book published in 1975 by Bernard Harrison. *Henry Fielding's “Tom Jones”: The Novelist as Moral Philosopher* argues that the novel is a dramatically crafted moral statement.¹⁰⁵ Like Battestin, Harrison shows that Fielding's “goodness of heart” theory would be little more than gutter romanticising without Fielding's insistence that thought is important to action; indeed, Harrison recalls that in *Tom Jones* hasty acts of goodness may finally be injurious. Unlike Shaftesbury, Fielding does not see virtue as a form of knowledge. For the novelist – and for Tom – that knowledge must be earned by action and consequent reflection, so that ultimately reflection will precede the action prompted by the impulse of a good heart. And that is Tom's story – a growth from pure boyish good-heartedness to a good-hearted manliness tempered by reflection.

One other critical interest in *Tom Jones* is political. Though it has always been obvious that the novel reflects Fielding's pro-Hanoverian stance, it was not until recently that critics began noticing the implications of his political beliefs on the novel. In 1967, for example, Battestin interpreted the Gypsy episode (XII, 11-12) as

a parable of the dangers of absolute monarchy as espoused by the Jacobites and by many Tories as well.¹⁰⁶ Fielding, Battestin suggests, feared a Stuart reign yet regarded it as nostalgic a fantasy as the absolutely ruled world of the gypsies who frighten Partridge. By 1772 Hunter had extended that suggestion to a claim that the cultural consciousness of the novel is 1745 when English constitutional government was threatened. And he sees Tom in a special sense, a character highly wrought in a political mythos:

As an heir who earned his estate – a rightful heir in the sense of moral right – Tom is the new man of English society, the man who needs education, experience, prudence, wisdom, and the grace of a benevolent deity to fulfill his responsible place in the fabric of English national life....

The political context is especially important in establishing the centrality of the constitutional question for the definition of a modern epic hero, for it represents a circumstantial solution. The Jacobite incursion into the new order of English life represented a backward thrust, nostalgia as easy solution. In their insistence on heredity and on a single person whose fate affected a nation, the Jacobites were absolutists, unbendable to situational and individual human needs. The constitutional solution of 1714 has its counterparts in psychological and ethical theory, and in making Tom Jones a nonmilitary, nonaristocratic, nonperfect hero, Fielding was creating not a “great” man in an old mold but a good man in a new one.¹⁰⁷

A contrary interpretation of Tom as a political symbol is that of Alan Swingewood, who sees him as “the hero of a declining [rural] gentry whose prestige and power were steadily being undermined” by the capitalistic urban world.¹⁰⁸

While Hunter and Swingewood saw mythically resonant politics in the novel, Anthony Kearney and Ronald Paulson interpreted elements in *Tom Jones* as more specifically allegorical. Kearney’s 1973 article claims that the themes of imposture and usurpation recall the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, as Blifil’s intrigues to usurp Tom’s place parallel the Pretender’s unholy bid for power, while Tom’s noble qualities reflect his own and the Hanoverian right to inheritance.¹⁰⁹ Yet four years later, though he recognized the Jacobite Rebellion as the background of *Tom Jones*, Paulson wonders whether Tom reminded 1749 readers not of King George but of Prince Charles Edward, for both heroes are wandering to find their true homes.¹¹⁰

Perhaps the best use made of the political background in the novel is in Thomas Cleary’s detailed 1973 article.¹¹¹ In it he concludes that Fielding probably imposed the specific historical background of the Jacobite invasion on the central books of *Tom Jones* during the first half of 1748 while he was at work on the *Jacobite’s Journal*, for virtually every attack on the Jacobites in the newspaper is thematically paralleled in the medial parts of *Tom Jones*. The major implication of this article is that Fielding’s sudden interpolation of this material into the novel violates the chronology established in the first six books. It also impairs character consistency, for in the sections before and after the interpolation, characters seem unaware of the Jacobite threat, even such political upholsterers as Western and his sister.

The final irony is that the “perfect” design of *Tom Jones* is consciously violated by an author who believed a political pronouncement to be more important than consummately finished artifice. The personal has impeded the aesthetic, a case that would recur in *Amelia*. Indeed, if there is a main trend in recent Fielding studies it concerns the influence of the literary climate on the novelist. Five books address this relationship and progressively show that cultural changes helped shape his aesthetic sensibility and thus his novels.

In 1967 Ronald Paulson’s *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* offered an assessment of Fielding’s development that closely considered the literary climate as influential. Essentially, Paulson sees Fielding developing “from law and a study of action (satire) to justice and an interest in being (novel).”¹¹² He finds that the plays and *Jonathan Wild* display Whig and Tory satiric habits, especially in the use of the villain. Judging the villain purely by his actions, Fielding reveals himself as an Augustan wit. But in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* the innocent replaces the villain as the central character, and it is the innocent who is a touchstone to expose the ridiculousness of his predators. Moreover, the innocent, unlike the earlier villain, is judged more by his motive than by his actions. *Amelia*, Paulson notes, is split by the alternate tendencies to the public (satiric) impulse and the private (novelistic) one. Paulson thus perceives a personal maturing on Fielding’s part that parallels the shift from the age of satire to that of sensibility.

Michael Irwin in the same year in *Henry Fielding: the Tentative Realist* also argues the influence of the literary climate,

but sees it as impeding rather than aiding Fielding's development.¹¹³ Irwin shows that Fielding was torn between his personal tendency to entertain, inseparable from his sensitivity to literary traditions, and his commitment to definite societal and moral positions. Wavering between purposes, he could not write a truly realistic novel. For example, as a playwright caught between the inherited artificial form of Restoration drama and the Augustan didactic imperative, Fielding is forced to satirize social abuses, an effect that precluded realistic comedy. Similarly, *Jonathan Wild* is retarded by the inconsistency between its romantic plot (in which society's values are upheld) and its ironic plot (in which they are attacked). *Joseph Andrew's* "loose-leaf" structure pits the narrative interest (Joseph's story) against the moral interest (Adams's story) to produce a spasmodic effect. *Tom Jones's* moral "predestination" of its characters precludes their realism. And *Amelia* fails as a realistic fiction largely because of its insistent didacticism and its obtrusive sentimental touches. Irwin concludes that Fielding was essentially committed to a moral purpose that eventually subverted his development as a novelist.

Like Paulson and Irwin, Leo Braudy in his 1970 book, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction: Hume, Fielding, and Gibbon*, demonstrates Fielding's response to the literary climate.¹¹⁴ He argues that the function of the narrator is a central question in the minds of such disparate writers as Hume, Gibbon, and Fielding. Braudy shows Fielding's development from the wild exuberance of *Joseph Andrews* to the carefully patterned moral allegory of *Jonathan Wild*. Blending both kinds of presentations in *Tom Jones*, Fielding achieves the fullest narrative effect. And in *Amelia*, Fielding fuses the narrator's public view of the world with the private morality of the heroine to allow a two-dimensional presentation. What Fielding finally achieved was a dual reality, consisting of the dynamics of characters moving through time and the epistemological reflection on them by the narrator, the reader, and the other characters.

The year 1972 witnessed the publication of two general studies of Fielding that continued this assessment of Fielding's relationship to his times. Claude Rawson's *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress* attempts to show the changes wrought in Fielding's style by the loss of confidence in the Augustan notion of Nature, "that animating ideal or live fiction of order and coherence."¹¹⁵ He sketches the early Fielding as confident in an ordered world, a certainty marked by his use of antitheses in the plays, *Jonathan Wild*, *Joseph Andrews*, and *Tom Jones*. But the "sense of beleaguered harmony, of forms preserved under stress, of feelings of doom and defeat" that Rawson senses in the early eighteenth century, ultimately turn Fielding into a grim and sarcastic commentator in *Amelia*. The argument is plausible, with some reservations. First, Rawson infers the social conditions from the text so that the "feelings of doom and defeat" are never pictured in the real world which, Rawson claims, influenced this change in Fielding. And second, such feelings may as well have come from Fielding's financial, physical, and familial conditions in 1751.

J. Paul Hunter's assessment of Fielding's career is more plausible. His object in *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chains of Circumstance* is remarkably similar to Rawson's. Setting Fielding's major works in their cultural contexts, Hunter argues that contemporary forces ("chains of circumstance") moved Fielding to use ad hoc rhetorical tactics ("occasional forms"). Unlike earlier critics, who sought after a fixed form in Fielding's work, Hunter shows Fielding adaptive and responsive to social, political, and literary events as well as to literary traditions. Hunter is more illustrative than the opaque Rawson in specifying just how the current climate affected Fielding. He does not see a "development" in Fielding as such, but rather a stimulus-response effect.

For example, Hunter recalls that *Shamela* was shaped by current theological debates and the popularity of *Pamela*, Middleton's *Cicero*, and Cibber's *Apology*. Its parodic form drew life from these sources. Similarly, deistic disputes and the holiness movement of William Law are in the background of *Joseph Andrews*, and the political spirit of the Forty-Five and the deistic-Anglican dispute inform *Tom Jones*. Such controversies as these, Hunter shows, shape the rhetoric of the novels. Their timely urgent appeal is played off against a more or less classical model that Fielding adapts as his basic form in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*. These novels, he concludes, are "reflexive," in that they transformed old forms in response to public events.¹¹⁶

These five recent books share some common characteristics that together designate a trend in contemporary work on Fielding. First, they are more study than research. There is little new information, so that their value is purely interpretative. With the social and political history of eighteenth-century England having been established by names like Lecky, Namier, Gipson, George, and Turberville, the literary application is now possible. Second, these books take a linear view of Fielding, the view of the historian but with the emphasis of the critic. This view is possible because the Fielding biography has been at least satisfactorily established and his single works have been separately

analyzed. Third, the linear scope has in its background the social, political, religious, and literary contexts that scholarship has established. Indeed, these books can be called contextual studies in their refusal to separate Fielding from his times. And last, they reveal a dualistic tendency. Each sees in Fielding a tension. For Irwin it is the strain between teaching and entertaining; for Paulson, between the “law” of satire and the “justice” of the novel; for Braudy, between primacy of action or of narration; and for Rawson and Hunter, between the demands of Fielding’s times and the demands of his art. Yet in spite of the outside tensions, the “perfect design” of *Tom Jones* remains largely unassailed by recent criticism.

NOTES

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