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PLOT AS IRONY: THE READER'S ROLE IN *TOM JONES*

BY JOHN PRESTON

I

Those who admire the plot of *Tom Jones* often find themselves in some embarrassment. To become engrossed in what Professor Kermode calls 'the Swiss precision of the plotting'¹ seems only to increase the difficulty of gauging the novel's imaginative scope. In this sense we must agree with Arnold Kettle 'that in *Tom Jones* there is too much plot.'² Fielding's smooth stage-managing of the action may well be thought to trivialise the book. This, indeed, is what Andrew Wright in effect concedes when he maintains that Fielding's art is serious because it is play, 'a special kind of entertainment.'³ His reading of the plot supports the view that we should 'take *Tom Jones* on an ornamental level,' that Fielding provides 'a kind of ideal delight.'⁴ But, granted that comedy depends on our feeling able to reshape life, and that the delight we take in this is properly a function of art's 'seriousness,' yet it may seem that this reading of *Tom Jones* gives away too much. After all, any achieved work of art takes on the status of play. That is what art is, in relation to life. And it may be that the works we recognize as 'playful' (the Savoy operas for instance) are just those in which play forfeits its seriousness. So, whilst appreciating the ease with which Fielding turns everything into delight, we have still to explain how he can, as James thought, 'somehow really enlarge, make everyone and everything important.'⁵ We know that Fielding's presence as narrator contributes to this impression. Can we say that the plot of the novel confirms it?

¹ *Tom Jones* (Signet Classics, 1963), p. 859.

² *An Introduction to the English Novel* (London, 1951), i.77.

³ *Henry Fielding, Mask and Feast* (London, 1965), p. 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 30.

⁵ *The Art of the Novel* (New York, 1934), p. 68.

It may be thought that to do so we should need to be more convinced that the plot was sensitive to the inner experience of the characters. We are not usually satisfied with plot which does not emanate from some 'inwardness,' some subtlety in attending to the growth of consciousness. Forster's distinction between plot and story will help to show why this is so. Story is to be considered 'a very low form' of art because it offers a sequence which has no meaning apart from that given by the sense of time. The significance of a train of events, the sense that it is 'caused,' arises when we discover in it the signs of personal will, of motives and desires and of the adjustments they call for. This is the kind of causality Forster illustrates: 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief.'⁶ Causality without these signs may be as trivial and meaningless as story. Consider 'The king died, and then the queen dyed all the curtains black.' This too is a plot: it answers the question 'why?'. But it does not take that question seriously. And it looks as if the plot of *Tom Jones* is unserious in this way. That is why there is something self-defeating about the attempts to analyse it: Fielding has answered the questions of the plot facetiously. Yet I do not think we are justified in deducing from this, as Ian Watt does, 'a principle of considerable significance for the novel form in general: namely, that the importance of the plot is in inverse proportion to that of character.'⁷ In fact Fielding makes it quite clear that he has been deliberately unserious about the plot. It is not typical; it has been designed specifically to serve his own special and rather subtle purpose.

There is no doubt that he means to draw attention to the artificiality of the plot. Why else, towards the close of the novel, recommend us to turn back 'to the scene at Upton in the ninth book' and 'to admire the many strange accidents which unfortunately prevented any interview between Partridge and Mrs. Waters' (XVIII, ii)? 'Fielding,' says Frank Kermode, 'cannot forbear to draw attention to his cleverness.'⁸ But is this likely? Fielding expected his readers to know what sort of writer would do this. He had already presented several such on the stage in his 'rehearsal' plays. Trapwit is a good example. He is the vain

⁶ *Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1927), Ch. 5.

⁷ *The Rise of the Novel* (London, 1957), p. 279.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 857.

author of an incoherent and unfunny comedy ('It is written, Sir, in the exact and true spirit of Moliere,' *Pasquin*, I, i); and he too is particularly proud of the plot.

Now, Mr. Fustian, the plot, which has hitherto been only carried on by hints, and open'd itself like the infant spring by small and imperceptible degrees to the audience, will display itself, like a ripe matron, in its full summer's bloom; and cannot, I think, fail with its attractive charms, like a loadstone, to catch the admiration of every one like a trap, and raise an applause like thunder, till it makes the whole house like a hurricane. (*Pasquin*, III, i)

Fielding means us to see that in *Tom Jones* the sequences are those of farce and that the real skill consists in using them in a certain way, to get at some truth about human nature. The plot not only does not develop character, it actually subdues character to the demands of comic action. It will have to be in the shape of this action that we discern the shape of human behaviour. And Fielding wants to make sure that we get the right impression of that shape.

We would do well, then, not to take Fielding's self-congratulation at face value. In reminding us of Book IX he intends us to be more subtle about it than he himself claims to be. We find there, of course, 'a plot-node of extraordinary complexity';⁹ but may too easily assume, as Kermode does, that this is exactly what robs this and subsequent actions of 'the full sense of actual life—real, unpredictable, not subject to mechanical patterning.'¹⁰ Actually the succeeding events *are* unpredictable. We could not possibly foresee from Book IX that Fitzpatrick and Mrs. Waters would go off together as 'husband and wife,' that Tom would be attacked by Fitzpatrick (though for his supposed affair with Mrs. Fitzpatrick, not his actual one with Mrs. Waters), or that this would involve him again with Mrs. Waters, or in what ways. When we look back on the completed sequence, it is true, we see it differently: the unpredictable suddenly appears to have hardened into the arbitrary. After all, we think, it *was* only a trick of the plotting. But, really, the plot faces two ways. From one side it looks like a forced solution, from the other an open question. In one way it looks arbitrary and contrived, in another it not only makes the reader guess but *keeps* him guessing at what

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 857.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 859.

has happened. The latter aspect of the plot is sustained by what Eleanor Hutchens calls 'substantial irony': 'a curious and subtle means used by Fielding to add irony to a given detail of plotting is to leave the reader to plot a sequence for himself.'¹¹ The reader has not, in fact, been told everything and is sometimes as much in the dark as the characters themselves. But irony of this kind is only contributory to the ironic shift by means of which the whole direction of the novel is reversed, and the plot has to sustain two contradictory conclusions simultaneously.

It is left to the reader to make this irony work. Fielding suggests as much by placing the reader in a dilemma. He draws him into the middle of the action, which then looks free-ranging, unpredictable, open-ended. If the plot is to behave like life, the reader must be unable to see his way before him. But he can only play this game once. On re-reading the novel he knows in advance the answer to all riddles, the outcome of all confusions. The plot thus poses questions about the way it should be read. Is it impossible to read the book more than once? Or is it necessary to read the book at least twice in order to understand it? On second reading do we reject the first, or are we in some way expected to keep them both in mind at once? This last is, I think, the only possibility Fielding leaves open for us, and it is this dual response which secures the ironic structure of the plot.

II

I think we can see why this must be so if we examine more closely the two 'faces' of the plot, and consider first what the book looks like when we can take the action as a diagram, or 'architecturally,' as Dorothy van Ghent does. She writes of it as a 'Palladian palace perhaps; . . . simply, spaciouly, generously, firmly grounded in Nature, . . . The structure is all out in the light of intelligibility.' This, she considers, diminishes its scope: 'Since Fielding's time, the world has found itself not quite so intelligible . . . there was much—in the way of doubt and darkness—to which Fielding was insensitive.'¹² Ian Watt offers a similar reading: 'it reflects the general literary strategy of neo-classicism . . . (it makes) visible in the human scene the operations of universal order.' Its function, he claims, is to reveal the

¹¹ *Irony in Tom Jones* (Alabama, 1965), p. 41.

¹² *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York, 1961), pp. 80-81.

important fact 'that all human particles are subject to an invisible force which exists in the universe whether they are there to show it or not.' The plot must act like a magnet 'that pulls every individual particle out of the random order brought about by temporal accident and human imperfection.'¹³ Read in this way it will appear as a paradigm of the Deistic world picture:

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see.
(*An Essay on Man*, i, 289-290)

Is this likely to be Fielding's meaning? It is true that in *The Champion* he asserts (against the Deists in fact) his belief in 'this vast regular frame of the universe, and all the artful and cunning machines therein,' and denies that they could be 'the effects of chance, of an irregular dance of atoms.' But he is still more concerned to deny that the Deity is 'a lazy, unactive being, regardless of the affairs of this world, that the soul of man, when his body dieth, lives no more, but returns to common matter with that of the brute creation' (Jan. 22, 1739-40). As James A. Work has shown,¹⁴ the concept of universal order was nothing for Fielding if it was not the evidence of God's providence and a support for personal faith. In fact the essay on Bolingbroke brings out specifically the moral and intellectual impropriety of reducing the Divine order to the status of a work of art. Bolingbroke, Fielding reasons, must be making game of eternal verities in considering 'the Supreme Being in the light of a dramatic poet, and that part of his works which we inhabit as a drama.' It is the impiety that is offensive of course, the 'ludicrous treatment of the Being so universally . . . acknowledged to be the cause of all things.' But involved in this is the mistrust of those artists who 'aggrandise their profession with such kind of similes.' Fielding's own procedure, if Ian Watt were right, would be uncomfortably close to this, and it may be that, once more, we should not take him literally when he claims to be in this position.

The beginning of Book X is an occasion when he does so:

First, then, we warn thee not too hastily to condemn any of the incidents in this our history, as impertinent and foreign to our main design, because thou dost not immediately conceive in what manner

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 271.

¹⁴ 'Henry Fielding, Christian Censor,' in *The Age of Johnson*, ed. F. W. Hilles (New Haven and London, 1949), pp. 140-142.

such incident may conduce to that design. This work may, indeed, be considered as a great creation of our own; and for a little reptile of a critic to presume to find fault with any of its parts, without knowing the manner in which the whole is connected, and before he comes to the final catastrophe, is a most presumptuous absurdity. (X, i)

This is equivocal. It may be taken to indicate that this is the structural centre of the novel, the peripeteia. It occurs at the height of the book's confusion and may be necessary to reassure the reader that the author is still in control. Yet it would be naive of Fielding to think that this was the way to do so, especially as he adopts a tone that suggests otherwise. He sounds touchy and self-defensive and tries to browbeat the reader. To claim that the work is 'a great creation of our own' is arrogant in the way that the essay on Bolingbroke indicated, and the arrogance is blatant in 'a little reptile of a critic.' Fielding clearly wants to discredit the narrator and, in the process, to make fun again of the pretensions of the plot. He makes a similar point in a different way in the introduction to Book XVII. Now he is asserting that affairs have got beyond his control.

... to bring our favourites out of their present anguish and distress, and to land them at last on the shore of happiness, seems a much harder task; a task, indeed, so hard, that we do not undertake to execute it. In regard to Sophia, it is more than probable, that we shall somewhere or other provide a good husband for her in the end, either Blifil, or my lord, or somebody else; but as to poor Jones, ... we almost despair of bringing him to any good. (XVII, i)

He cannot invoke supernatural assistance: 'to natural means alone we are confined. Let us see, therefore, what by these means may be done for poor Jones' (XVII, i). But this again is a kind of boast. At any rate it draws attention to the hard work and (paradoxically) the artifice necessary to reach a 'natural' outcome. It is another way of claiming that the design is intact. His pride in his own skill is obtrusive here as elsewhere. But this can hardly mean that Fielding had the kind of vanity which is the mark of the bad writer, unsure of his own powers.

We must conclude, I think, that to pose as a bad writer will help Fielding to avoid slipping into shallow rationalism. If he poses as the invisible Divine presence behind events, it is with a full sense of the kind of error this would be. What in one sense is an ironic parody of a form is, in a more profound way, an

ironic repudiation of spiritual arrogance. In the same way the plot is less an assertion of Augustan rationality than a recognition of the confusion the rationalist can hardly tolerate. It is in fact a vehicle for what is self-contradictory, what is emotionally as well as intellectually confusing in human experience.

III

This is an aspect of the plot that Eleanor Hutchens admirably describes:

Substantial irony is an integral part of the fabric of *Tom Jones*. Just as the straightforward plot moves from misfortune to prosperity along a tightly linked causal chain but brings the hero full circle back to the place of beginning, so the concomitant irony of plot turns things back upon themselves transformed. This larger structure is repeated in multitudinous smaller ironies of plot, character, and logic. . . . The reversal of truth and expectation accompanies plot and theme as a sort of ironic *doppelgänger*.¹⁵

Her main concern is to identify the specific episodes ('ironies of the plot . . . so numerous as to defy complete cataloguing'¹⁶) which add an ironic dimension to the whole narrative. But what she calls the 'concomitant irony of plot' can be taken to refer to a reversal of meaning in the plot as a whole, and it is in this way that it produces the effect we noted, of seeming to face two ways at once. The 'causal chain' that 'Fielding-as-narrator' boasts about seems to strengthen the possibility of a comprehensible order in human experience. But the plot also moves through a causal sequence of a different kind, a sequence of coincidence, chance meetings and meetings missed, good luck and bad, unplanned and unforeseen events. From this point of view it is easier to see that Fielding is dealing with the unpredictable, not in character or motive—his theory of 'conservation of character' leads in quite a different direction—but, to use his own term, in the 'history,' the shape of events. The meaning of history, as Philip Stevick has shown,¹⁷ interested Fielding profoundly and the plot of *Tom Jones*, set against actual historical events, helps to define that meaning.

The episode of Sophia's little bird (IV, iii), which Eleanor

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁷ 'Fielding and the Meaning of History,' *PMLA*, Vol. LXXIX, p. 561.

Hutchens cites as an example of irony of substance,¹⁸ is even more interesting as a model of this ironic meaning in the action as a whole. The causal links are firm: the bird is a present from Tom, therefore Sophia cherishes it, therefore Blifil lets it escape, therefore Tom tries to catch it and falls, therefore Sophia raises the alarm, therefore Allworthy and the rest come and eventually pass judgment on the two boys. The sequence does, it is true, depend on character and motive; but, like the plot as a whole, it finds these less interesting than their consequences in the actions and opinions of others. The episode is trimmed to the requirements of parable: it moves from personal predicament to moral judgment. In this way the episode suggests how the whole plot will be designed to exercise and refine the faculty of judgment, an aspect of the book I examined in a previous article.¹⁹ At this stage, however, it is more to the point to note that the action in this episode can be traced through another kind of sequence. It springs from a paradoxical situation: the affection of Tom and Sophia is expressed in the captivity, Blifil's malicious envy in the releasing of the bird. There is truth to feeling in that situation; it is carefully staged, no doubt, but does not seem forced. Yet the subsequent action is quite fortuitous. Tom's actions could not have been predicted, for we had not even been told that he was near at hand; the branch need not have broken; there was no reason to expect that the bird would be caught and carried away by 'a nasty hawk.' The events no longer seem to explain each other. What seemed to have an almost mathematical logic now defies rationalisation. Actions cannot be foreseen, nor can their consequences be calculated: Blifil's malice, for instance, is better served by chance than by design. And intention, will, desire, all are overruled by Fortune.

This is one essential meaning of the plot. It is designed to tolerate the random decisions of Fortune. If Fielding has an arbitrary way with the plot this is not in order to square it with some concept of Reason or Nature, the 'one clear, unchang'd and universal light,' but to reflect our actual experience. 'I am not writing a system, but a history,' he reminds his readers, 'and I am not obliged to reconcile every matter to the received notions

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁹ 'Tom Jones and the "Pursuit of True Judgment,"' *ELH*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Sept., 1966, p. 315.

concerning truth and nature' (XII, viii). And in *The Champion* he argues that the historian especially should be prepared to allow for the effects of chance. 'I have often thought it a blemish in the works of Tacitus, that he ascribes so little to the interposition of this invincible being; but, on the contrary, makes the event of almost every scheme to depend on a wise design, and proper measure taken to accomplish it' (Dec. 6, 1739). He goes so far as to assert that wisdom is 'of very little consequence in the affairs of this world: human life appears to me to resemble the game of hazard, much more than that of chess; in which latter, among good players, one false step must infallibly lose the game; whereas, in the former, the worst that can happen is to have the odds against you, which are never more than two to one' (Ib.). No doubt this extreme position is offered with due irony. Fielding briskly corrects it in the opening chapter of *Amelia*: men accuse Fortune 'with no less absurdity in life, than a bad player complains of ill luck at the game of chess.' Also, as Irvin Ehrenpreis observes, Fielding can see a way to resist Fortune: he 'opposes Christian providence to pagan Fortune. Since it operates by chance, fortune may indeed advance vice and obstruct virtue. . . . But steady prudent goodness will attract the blessing of the Lord, and wisdom is justified of her children.'²⁰ Yet this is not to argue that Fielding rejects the role of Fortune, or does not feel its force. On the contrary, he implies that Fortune is the term we must use to describe the human condition, the element in which human qualities are formed and human virtues and vices operate. This is in fact the source of his moral confidence. *Amelia*, as George Sherburn points out, is intended to cure the hero of 'psychological flaccidity' and of thinking that in an often irrational world 'moral energy is futile.'²¹ And *Tom Jones* celebrates 'that solid inward comfort of mind which is the sure companion of innocence and virtue' (Dedication), and which will not be at the mercy of Fortune. A 'sanguine' temper, says Fielding, 'puts us, in a manner, out of the reach of Fortune, and makes us happy without her assistance' (XIII, vi).

There are, then, qualities of mind which rise above Fortune; but Fortune is the medium in which they operate. And, above

²⁰ *Fielding: Tom Jones* (London, 1964), p. 51.

²¹ 'Fielding's Social Outlook,' *Eighteenth-Century English Literature*, ed. J. L. Clifford (New York and Oxford, 1959), p. 263.

all, Fortune is the medium of comedy. This, certainly, is what more than anything makes it tolerable. But, particularly because it is the source for comic complication, we shall want to see how it opposes the idea of a benevolently ordered world. Since comedy does in the end fulfil our expectations, it may after all persuade us that Fielding is tampering with events and trying to make the plot act 'as a kind of magnet.' But in fact Fielding creates his comedy out of the way his characters try to dominate Fortune and fail. They try to make things turn out as they want them to, but neither the narrator nor the reader can be persuaded that the desired conclusion has been reached by trying. It is itself the gift of Fortune. The beauty of the comedy is not that it establishes a coherent universe, but that for the time being it allows the reader to believe in *good* Fortune.

The basis of the comic action is the 'pursuit motif' which Dorothy van Ghent has identified with such clarity.²² It is implicit in the story of Sophia's little bird, and later comes to dominate events. Sophia follows Tom, Squire Western chases Sophia, Tom later pursues Sophia, Fitzpatrick pursues his wife, Allworthy and Blifil follow the Westerns to town, where Blifil will pursue Sophia. In the Upton scenes the theme comes to a climax in an intricate comic entanglement. And Fielding turns to 'epic' simile to underline what is happening. 'Now the little trembling hare, which the dread of all her numerous enemies, and chiefly of that cunning, cruel, carnivorous animal, man, had confined all the day to her lurking place, sports wantonly o'er the lawns; . . .' (X, ii). The simile of the hunt is used again in Book X, Chapter vi to describe Fitzpatrick's pursuit of his wife: 'Now it happens to this sort of men, as to bad hounds, who never hit off a fault themselves, . . .' And Fielding makes sure that we notice what he is doing: 'Much kinder was she (Fortune) to me, when she suggested that simile of the hounds, just before inserted; since the poor wife may, on these occasions, be so justly compared to a hunted hare.' Immediately afterwards, 'as if this had been a real chase,' Squire Western arrives 'hallooing as hunters do when the hounds are at fault.' Later, Mrs. Fitzpatrick uses the image to describe her own situation: she 'wisely considered that the virtue of a young lady is, in the world, in the same situation with a poor hare, which is certain, whenever it

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

ventures abroad, to meet its enemies; for it can hardly meet any other' (XI, x). These images bring out an element of crudity in the motif: 'we have got the dog-fox, I warrant the bitch is not far off' (X, vii). The chases are anything but rational; they are headlong, indiscreet, urged on by primitive instinct. Thus, when Western is easily diverted from one pursuit to another, from the chase of his daughter to the chase of a hare, Fielding quotes the story of the cat who was changed into a woman yet 'leaped from the bed of her husband' to chase a mouse. 'What are we to understand by this?', he asks. 'The truth is, as the sagacious Sir Roger l'Estrange observes, in his deep reflections, that "if we shut nature out at the door, she will come in at the window; and that puss, though a madam, will be a mouser still"' (XII, ii). Dorothy van Ghent, who notes that 'instinctive drives must . . . be emphasized as an important constituent of "human nature,"' does not in fact observe that Fielding explicitly links them in this way with the theme of pursuit. Her idea is that the book is based on 'a conflict between natural, instinctive feeling, and those appearances with which people disguise, deny, or inhibit natural feeling.'²³ This is not convincing. It seems better to follow Fielding's hints that the action, a series of rash pursuits, shows human behaviour to be irrational, governed chiefly by instinct not reflection, and therefore particularly exposed to Fortune.

These factors in human behaviour are above all what bring about the loosening of the causal chain and frustrate the intentions of the characters. In Book XII, Chapter viii Fielding acknowledges that it must seem 'hard,' indeed 'very absurd and monstrous' that Tom should offend Sophia, not by his actual unfaithfulness but by his supposed 'indelucacy' in cheapening her name. Some, he thinks, will regard 'what happened to him at Upton as a just punishment for his wickedness with regard to women of which indeed it was the immediate consequence'; and others, 'silly and bad persons,' will argue from it that 'the characters of men are rather owing to accident than to virtue'; but the author himself admits no more than that it confirms the book's 'great, useful and uncommon doctrine,' which, however, 'we must not fill up our pages with frequently repeating.' He proceeds to show the absurdity of trying to adjust our behaviour to a system of cause and effect. Tom becomes totally unlike

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 68.

himself, no longer a creature of appetite but a romantic lover, as Partridge tells him: 'Certainly, sir, if ever man deserved a young lady, you deserve young Madam Western; for what a vast quantity of love must a man have, to be able to live upon it without any other food, as you do? (XII, xiii). Yet this does not make Tom immune from Fortune; when he reaches Mrs. Fitzpatrick's house in London he misses Sophia by ten minutes. 'In short, this kind of hair-breadth missings of happiness look like the insults of fortune, who may be considered as thus playing tricks with us, and wantonly diverting herself at our expense' (XIII, ii). In the end his romantic persistence leads him to the most discreditable episode of the book: after hanging round Mrs. Fitzpatrick's door all day he finally enters her drawing room to meet Lady Bellaston.

Similarly, the dénouement, the solving of all the riddles, is brought about by chance, indeed by mistake. Tom can do nothing to help himself. In the end it is Mrs. Waters who is able to explain matters. But she herself is at first ignorant who Tom is. She only discovers that Jones is Bridget Allworthy's child when she is visited by the lawyer Dowling. He in turn has been sent by Bliffl to say that she 'should be assisted with any money (she) wanted to carry on the prosecution' against Jones. It is his malice, apparently so obstructive, which in spite of his intentions, leads to the ending we desire. Our expectations are realised only by being twice contradicted.

IV

It is now possible to see why the reading of the plot should be able to sustain a large irony. We shall be tempted into a choice of readings. But, if we think ourselves objective, surveying a complete design which has been distanced by its past tense and assimilated into 'history,' we may well find in it a degree of order that Fielding hardly intended. If, on the other hand, Fielding is trying in many ways to undermine our sense of objectivity and privilege, we must find ourselves drawn into the confusion and hazard of the action, aware now of 'history' as a process in which we are involved, moving toward effects we cannot predict: we are not allowed to understand more of the course of events than the characters do. Yet, as we have seen, this kind of involvement is only possible on the first reading. Fielding has

written into the narrative an assumption that must be contradicted by subsequent readings. Indeed, one cannot read even once through the book without finding that many passages have come to take on an altered meaning.

Irvin Ehrenpreis sees this as confirming that, like *Oedipus Rex*, the book is essentially a sustained dramatic irony. Behind the many moments of 'discovery,' of 'sudden understanding' which he regards as really the action of the book there is, he says, 'the supreme recognition scene disclosing the true parentage of Tom Jones. The opening books of the novel are permeated with ironies that depend on his being Bridget Allworthy's firstborn child, or young Bliffl's elder brother, or Mr. Allworthy's proper heir.' What we admire, what Coleridge must have been praising, is 'the cheerful ease with which Fielding suspends his highest revelation till the end, the outrageous clues with which he dares assault our blindness in the meantime.'²⁴ This seems to me an important truth about the novel. But it seems also to imply other more complex truths which Mr. Ehrenpreis does not consider. Apparently Fielding can, even on a second reading, be supposed to be 'suspending' the final revelation; we can be held to retain our 'blindness' in spite of what we have discovered. That is, we have a sense of duality not only in the book itself but in our own response to it. We recognize our 'blindness' just because we no longer suffer from it. We know and do not know simultaneously: we are both outside and inside the pattern of events. Like Eliot's Tiresias we 'have foresuffered all,' yet are still capable of being surprised. If the book has a core of dramatic irony, it is one in which the reader knows himself to be caught, or of which he knows himself to be the source. He is the observer of his own ironic mistakes. Our responses to the book are, we may say, part of the reason for Fielding's laughter, a laughter in which we share. We are, in short, never quite ignorant nor yet entirely omniscient. In this way the book leads us to one of the most rewarding experiences of comedy: it simultaneously confuses and enlightens, it produces both question and answer, doubt and reassurance.²⁵ This is a far cry from the imitation of Universal

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 23-4.

²⁵ Cf. Ehrenpreis, *op. cit.*, p. 66: 'such surprises combine puzzlement with relief'; and p. 65: 'The same agent seems repeatedly to save us from perils to which he alone has exposed us; we are continually being lost and found by the same guide.'

Reason; yet it offers a way out of the confusion of human experience. The book suggests the power of control in the very act of undermining that power; or, from another point of view, can play with the possibilities of confusion because the sense of control is never lost. It can accept the reality of fortune because it has achieved the wisdom that an acceptance of fortune gives.

Chapters vii, viii and ix of Book V are a notable example of this procedure. Allworthy is ill and is not expected to live. This is the situation as the other characters understand it, and Fielding says nothing that would allow us to understand more of it. Our only advantage over them is in our emotional detachment, as for instance, when we see them betray their dissatisfaction at Allworthy's legacies. When the attorney from Salisbury arrives we know no more than they do who he is or what news he brings. In fact we know less than Blifil; like the other characters we are his dupes. Fielding gives no sign that there is anything more in the situation; indeed by depicting at some length the disappointed greed of Allworthy's dependants he implies that the scene can only carry this limited and obvious irony. Yet our experience of the rest of the novel persuades us that there is much more to be seen. On a second reading, we know already that Allworthy's illness will not be fatal; this, in fact, is what keeps the scene within the limits of comic decorum. This is what enables R. S. Crane to say that as the novel progresses things become both more and more, and less and less serious, that it offers a 'comic analogue of fear.'²⁶ Also we know, what Fielding appeared to think we should not know, that the attorney is the lawyer Dowling and that he brings Bridget Allworthy's own dying words, 'Tell my brother, Mr. Jones is his nephew—He is my son—Bless him!', words that are not recorded in the novel until Book XVIII, Chapter viii. Now the scene at Allworthy's death-bed is superimposed on the silent, unacknowledged presence of that other death-bed. Fielding chose deliberately *not* to present this as a dramatic irony. The scene as he renders it takes all its significance from information he has denied us, from knowledge we import into the scene, as it were without his consent. The words that are not spoken reverberate thus throughout the novel. But, as they have *not* been spoken, their sound is produced in one part of the

²⁶ 'The Concept of Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*,' *Critics and Criticism* (Chicago, 1952), pp. 635-6.

reader's mind whilst he is deaf to it with the other. In fact, as Ehrenpreis shows, what is at the centre of his attention is the *fact* of their not being spoken, the audacity with which Fielding so nearly gives away the riddle of the book. We admire his skill in keeping it dark, but could not do so if we did not at the same time know what it was.

In another way, however, our dual vision of things actually seems to undermine our confidence in the narrator. Since we are left to supply information necessary to the full understanding of a scene, we fancy ourselves better informed than the narrator himself. Often enough, indeed, the narrator professes his inadequacy: 'the fact is true; and perhaps may be sufficiently accounted for by suggesting . . .' (V, x). But this, as Eleanor Hutchens shows,²⁷ is an ironic trick designed to make us attend in exactly the way the author desires. There is, however, a much more pervasive sense that the narrator cannot (or does not) reveal many things that the reader nevertheless is aware of. Of course the reader is aware of them only because he at last appreciates the design the author has had in mind from the beginning. But since the author does not actually write such things into the text of the novel, since he leaves the reader to supply them silently, he gives the impression that in some important ways the novel has written itself.

In the scenes we have been discussing, Fielding observes that Blifil is offended at Tom's riotous behaviour so soon after Allworthy's illness and Bridget's death. There is apparently no doubt as to Blifil's feelings and motives; '... Mr. Blifil was highly offended at a behaviour which was so inconsistent with the sober and prudent reserve of his own temper.' Yet, however little sympathy we feel for Blifil, we sense that there is some justice in his attitude: 'He bore it too with the greater impatience, as it appeared to him very indecent at this season: "When," as he said, "the house was a house of mourning, on the account of his dear mother." Jones's ready sympathy and remorse reflect our own response: 'he offered to shake Mr. Blifil by the hand, and begged his pardon, saying, his excessive joy for Mr. Allworthy's recovery had driven every other thought out of his mind.' Yet, after all, this does not shake our conviction that Blifil is hateful: he soon reverts to the behaviour we expect of

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

him: 'Blifil scornfully rejected his hand; and, with much indignation, answered, it was little to be wondered at, if tragical spectacles made no impression on the blind; but, for his part, he had the misfortune to know who his parents were, and consequently must be affected with their loss' (V, ix). These are the terms in which the narrator has constructed the episode. This must be our reading of it as it stands. Yet that is not the way in which we do read it. When Blifil speaks of his mother's death we know that he knows that she is also Tom's mother. Tom's generous sympathy, then, far from helping to justify Blifil, actually heightens our sense of outrage. And Blifil's response, no longer just a gratuitous and insulting sneer at Tom's illegitimacy, becomes a piercing revelation of his own utter inhumanity. Not only can he allow Tom to remain ignorant that his mother has just died, he can actually, with staggering impudence, make his words a concealed taunt. He finds it possible to use his knowledge for a cruel secret game: 'he had the misfortune to know who his parents were, and consequently must be affected with their loss.'

There are, then, areas of meaning which the narrator does not even mention. But his reticence does not prevent us becoming conscious of them. Thus the book begins to escape from the narrow designs imposed on it, from the conscious intention of the narrator. After all it does seem to acquire something of the 'full sense of actual life.' Fielding is not always obtrusive; in fact, it is at this deep level, where the authenticity of the book is most in question, that he is least in evidence. We noted that in those instances where he pushed himself forward he was wanting the reader to look elsewhere for the real intention. But though the text is centred on the unpredictable, on the random behaviour of Fortune, the full scope of the novel is to be measured in the dual meaning of the plot. The author leaves the book to itself, or rather, to the reader. In other words, Fielding has been able by means of the plot, to create a reader wise enough to create the book he reads.

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