THE FUNCTION OF STORY IN THE NOVEL, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FIELDING AND STERNE

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Summary

The impulse to tell a story has always been a fundamental driving force in narrative literature, yet it is one which has been largely ignored in both the discussion and evaluation of prose fiction. This neglect is most marked in criticism of the novel, where the simpler and more basic satisfactions provided by story are generally disparaged as irrelevant, and even detrimental, to an appreciation of the novel as a serious artistic concern. The term "story" itself is usually accompanied by the definite article to specify only the general characteristics peculiar to a particular narrative action, while "plot" is used to refer to those aspects of structure and design which shape the action into a significant form. Indeed, to the extent that story is differentiated at all from plot, the distinction is between the incidental and the artful, between the products of the "gifted" story-teller and the "skilled" maker of plots.

Stories, however, have their own distinctive formal characteristics, and in Chapter 1 these are explored in an attempt to isolate story as an autonomous functional entity. Story is defined in terms of its emotional pattern, which characteristically begins with an undefined state of uneasiness or disquiet, followed by a steady increase in tension until, at the last possible moment, the tension is released in a resolution which generates a feeling of relief or satisfaction. This pattern follows a logic peculiar to story-telling, and often in contrast or indeed opposition to the logic of the plot.

The latter is explored more fully in Chapter 2, together with the relative value of story and plot to the novel. Plot is seen as an intellectual ordering of the action, so that events are made to gain significance by their relationship to a developing meaning. Story, on the other hand, is a means of making emotional sense of the world, of satisfying basic human needs that cannot be ignored and should not be despised. To ignore the felt consistencies of story is also to ignore the ways in which they qualify and even subvert the rational consistencies of plot, and to despise them is also to despise the value of sympathetic involvement in the experience of others, a quality fundamental to the compulsion of all narrative literature.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, the narrative structure of epic and romance is explored to provide an historical perspective which serves two related ends: first, an examination of narrative genres which, unlike the novel, are not dominated by the concern to unify action under a coherent plot, revealing more clearly the demands and achievements of the story-telling art; secondly, a more detailed examination of the structure of romances by Chrétien, Gottfried, Wolfram, and Ariosto, leading to a better understanding of the limited extent to which the novel diverges from its narrative heritage. The interest shown by novelists in plot as a unifying agent is seen as a reflection of a change, not in the writer's attitude towards the value of story, but in his understanding of the way in which stories should be told.

In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, the narrative technique of two eighteenth-century novelists is examined in detail. Fielding's

Tom Jones has long, and justifiably, been celebrated as a masterpiece of plot-making, but its success as a narrative is owing to something more than a well-designed plot, as a comparison with *Amelia* only too well shows. In *Amelia*, the mechanisms of the plot place Booth clearly and unequivocably on trial, but in *Tom Jones* involvement in the story and sympathy for Tom also place the reader on trial. Furthermore, the story also makes fundamental and necessary qualifications to the terms of the trial, enforcing human rather than abstract truths, and cultivating humane rather than coolly clinical judgements. In *Tristram Shandy*, however, Sterne goes one step further, using story to subvert rather than simply qualify plot. In a world which cannot be understood rationally, the intuitive sympathy encouraged by story-telling techniques becomes a feasible alternative to reason as a means of knowing this world and the people in it.

I hereby certify that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material written or published by another person, except when due reference is made in the text.

Signed .

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CHAPTER 1

"To invent good Stories, and to tell them well . . ."

Although telling stories and writing novels are generally regarded as being closely related activities, the impression gained from much literary criticism is that the relationship, far from being profitable or enlightening, is rather one of those unfortunate facts of life which have to be lived with and borne stoically. Vexed by the capacity of a good story to lead its reader blindly along by the heart-strings, and wary of a compulsion which seems detrimental to the appreciation of more serious, intellectual concerns, the critic tends to see story as something which the reader should rise above. Typical of the patronizing attitude is E. M. Forster's response to stories and their stubborn association with the business of writing novels:

> The story is primitive, it reaches back to the origins of literature, before reading was discovered, and it appeals to what is primitive in us. That is why we are so unreasonable over the stories we like, and so ready to bully those who like something else. . . . Intolerance is the atmosphere stories generate. The story is neither moral nor is it favourable to the understanding of the novel in its other aspects. If we want to do that we must come out of the cave.[1]

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1 E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (1927; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1962) p. 48.

It is with evident distaste that Forster feels himself compelled to allow that "low atavistic form" a place in the writing of novels. He makes it clear that he does so only as a concession to the reader's primitive yearnings, to appease in him the residual spirit of his ancestral "audience of shockheads" hanging expectantly on each word for what happens next. In return he expects the reader to come out of the cave and read novels not for the story but for the nobler interests of character, plot, theme, pattern, and rhythm.

Forster's dismissal of story may not be matched for truculence, but he does at least articulate what so much criticism, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, has simply implied. It is easy to sense, for example, the general feeling of eager anticipation for just deserts behind Samuel Johnson's comment that if Richardson were read for the story the reader would hang himself.[2] Similarly, it takes little critical acumen to discern the present direction of scholarly opinion when a noted critic can publish an anthology of short narratives which seem to have little claim to note-worthiness beyond the literary disposition expressed in the title of the collection, Anti-story.[3] These examples may be untypical in the extremity of their renunciation, but they are of a kind with the more usual critical practice of disowning story by ignoring it. If the much abused inter-planetary visitor were introduced to narrative literature via a standard critical text, he could be forgiven for

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2 James Boswell, Life of Johnson (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 480.

3 Philip Stevick, ed., Anti-story: an Anthology of Experimental Fiction (New York: The Free Press, 1971).

departing with the belief that earthlings spend a great deal of time reading moral and philosophical treatises rather than novels about fictional people caught in the grip of an absorbing network of events. As Douglas Hewitt comments, taking as his example the volume on Dostoevsky in the series, Twentieth Century Views:

> it is easy to forget that the critics are discussing novels which take some time to read and tell stories about people who have relationships with one another; they tend to present philosophic statements as the meanings of the books.[4]

The reluctance to deal critically, or for that matter, seriously, with the literary use of story is in marked contrast to the considerable critical enthusiasm that exists for investigations of the relevance of plot. The past two centuries have seen the literary definition of plot expand from its association with the non-literary usage as a plan or framework to incorporate first a sense of the author's controlling purpose and then the ability to generate, rather than simply reflect, meaning. And the action which it encompasses has come to include "verbal" action as well as human action. These changes will be explored later in more detail, but the point to be made now is that story, while used virtually interchangeably with plot on a casual descriptive level, has undergone no corresponding sophistication of meaning. On the contrary, story has been defined almost out of existence.

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4 Douglas Hewitt, The Approach to Fiction: Good and Bad Readings of Novels (London: Longmans, 1972), p. 170.

In 1927 Forster stated clearly and concisely that "a story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence",[5] a definition which more recently Scholes and Kellogg echo, though with a less specific focus, when they refer to story as a

> general term for character and action in a narrative form.[6]

Despite a lack of agreement on the incorporation of "time sequence" on the one hand, and "character" on the other, the definitions at least concur on the point of "narrative". Unfortunately, Forster does not go on to define narrative; even less fortunately, Scholes and Kellogg do:

> By narrative we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller.[7]

That leaves us with the rather unhappy definition of story as a general term for character and action in a form distinguished by the presence of a story and a story-teller.

Other attempts to define story have focused on a conception of a pre-existing and relatively unstructured series of events which is shaped by the artist into a literary narrative. Humphry House, for example, writing in the context of the literature of ancient Greece, suggests that

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5 Aspects of the Novel, pp. 37-8.

6 Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 208.

7 ibid., p. 4.

> There is first a rambling and amorphous "story", often taken over from tradition or picked up from some other extraneous source . . . and then comes the serious business of making it into a play or an epic.[8]

Plot is specified as the vehicle of this making. More recently, and in the context of the novel, Sheldon Sacks has posited a similar, though more sophisticated, relationship between story and plot, and does so without finding it necessary to disparage story, as House has done, by dividing literary activity into the incidental business of "picking up" a story and the "serious business" of plot-making. Sacks suggests that story is an abstraction which does not achieve a concrete realization until it is rendered into a plot.[9] In a similar vein, Boris Tomashevsky, a Russian Formalist, argues that story is "the action itself" and plot is "how the reader learns the action."[10]

Thus story is considered to be either a rudimentary kind of narrative, or something intangible which is not yet narrative. Neither approach is really satisfactory, however, for the first defines story in terms of narrative without providing a definition of narrative that incorporates the grounds of the distinction it wishes to make, and the

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8 Humphry House, Aristotle's Poetics (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956), p. 55.

9 Sheldon Sacks, "Novelists as Story-tellers," Modern Philology, Supplement to honour Arthur Friedman, LXXIII (1976), S97-S109. Sacks does point out that his concept of story is different from "what many people mean by story - merely the material action alone" (S105), while House's theory seems merely to expand on this generally-held idea.

10 Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics", in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 67n.

second can only define story in terms of what it has not yet become - that is narrative. Vague definitions would be no great handicap to literary criticism if the function of story in the novel amounted to little more than Forster's palliative to the peasant reader, something to keep the fellow amused while he is fed what is good for him. But the story to which readers and novelists alike have clung with such affection is not just a little piece of our primitive past betraying our negligent inadequacy in the appreciation of the truly literary. Nor is the novel such an imperfect art form that its "goodness" is not a product of, or even necessarily related to, the diversion during which it is engendered. Story is the most important element common to all narrative literature, it is the novel's link with its past and a guarantee of its enduring value. Story, I will argue, as distinct from plot, gives to narrative a characteristic shape which is best described in terms of a pattern of emotional response, and its function in the novel is so to involve the reader that the experience of the characters becomes a personal concern.

If we intend to seek out the essential form of story, there seems little harm in starting with whatever basis of agreement we can find in the approaches discussed above. That point of agreement, flimsy though it may be, is that story is in some way related to narrative. Disagreement focuses on the exact nature of the relationship, on whether story is a kind of narrative or narrative a kind of story. At this stage a definition of narrative would be useful. Foregoing the definition offered by Scholes and Kellogg (which in the

circumstances of this argument and in the context of their own can only be seen as somewhat circular) in favour of the more explicit Oxford English Dictionary definition, which stresses the rendering of events to form a continuous sequence, we can then approach a definition of story by investigating whether story can satisfactorily be seen as formless raw material (as the story-as-not-yet-narrative position suggests) or whether story is more accurately a kind of narrative whose distinctiveness can be isolated by specifying those features which make the rendering of events continuous and sequential.

Unless story is confined solely to its fiction-bearing capacity (and used in the sense that children tell "stories" rather than disagreeable truths, for example), it is difficult to justify any conception of it as the formless raw material of narrative. For adults and children alike, the appeal of stories - of, indeed, the very idea of a story - has as much to do with the manner of its telling as it has with the subject rendered. "Tell me the story of" King Arthur, for example, has altogether different implications from "tell me about" King Arthur. The first asks for a sense of wholeness in the rendition, a fullness of detail which need not be necessary for the second request, and a feeling of completion which clearly bears witness to the fact of a beginning and an end.

At this stage it should be acknowledged that, were this request made in public today, the form would in all likelihood be supplied by a plot. As early as 1909, Arthur Ransome was bemoaning the current plight of story:

> Story-telling has nowadays only a shamefaced existence outside books. . . . If a man has a story to tell after dinner he carefully puts it into slang, or tells it with a jerk and gesture in as few words as possible; it is as if he were to hold up a little placard deprecating the idea that he is telling a story at all. The only tales in which we allow ourselves much detail of colouring and background are those in which public opinion has prohibited professional competition. We tell improper stories as competently as ever. But, for the other tales, we set them out concisely, almost curtly, refusing any attempt to imitate the fuller, richer treatment of literature. Our tales are mere plots.[11]

While the public restriction on professional competition in the telling of improper stories may no longer apply, Ransome's observation that our oral stories have become "mere plots" still holds true. In casual terminology, story and plot have grown to mean roughly the same thing. They are, however, fundamentally different, and narrative criticism, as well as after-dinner entertainment, would profit by a more discriminating awareness of their respective contributions to structural design.

Plot is one means of conferring order on narrative. In terms of the definition of narrative stated earlier, it renders events continuous and sequential on the basis of rationally perceived relationships. For Forster, these relationships are basically causal in nature, and while some critics, such as R. S. Crane and Alvin B. Kernan, would argue that the effect of plot on narrative extends

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11 Arthur Ransome, A History of Story-telling (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1909), p. 6.

beyond the ability to reveal "why" something happens next,[12] most would agree with Forster that plot is "the novel in its logical intellectual aspect".[13] Crane, for example, maintains that plot has the power to affect our opinions and emotions, but plot itself is still seen as the product of cognitive processes. He sees its form as the correlation of three variables:

> (1) the general estimate . . . of the moral character and deserts of the hero . . . (2) the judgements . . . about the nature of the events that actually befall the hero or seem likely to befall him, as having either painful or pleasurable consequences for him . . . and (3) the opinions . . . concerning the degree and kind of his responsibility . . .[14]

If, in response to the request, "tell me the story of King Arthur", we were supplied with a carefully constructed plot, the rendition would not be without its satisfactions. Simon O. Lesser, in Fiction and the Unconscious, describes the psychic pleasures afforded by a plot which rigorously excises the irrelevant and arranges action to reveal causal as well as chronological connections. In life, Lesser argues, our minds are not usually persistent enough to keep our attention from

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12 See R. S. Crane, "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones", in Critics & Criticism: Ancient & Modern (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 616 - 647; and Alvin B. Kernan, The Plot of Satire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

13 Aspects of the Novel, p. 103.

14 "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones", p. 632 (my italics).

wandering and spreading, but fiction "keeps our eyes hypnotically fixed on the skein of the plot as it unravels itself".[15]

A plot can also be satisfying in a more mundane sense. Narratives may or may not be true, but causality is in a way objectively so. It operates according to rules which are intellectually comprehensible, providing an internal probability which gives the narrative an independent framework of belief. For the novelist, it ensures that there is always "one foot, sheer circumstantiality, to stand on, whatever the other foot may be doing".[16]

What the other foot very often is doing is something much less pedestrian: climbing from the limbo of the actual and plausible into the realms of story-telling. Richmond Lattimore, in an investigation of story patterns in Greek tragedy, suggests that story, "as an ordered series of events, has its own rights".[17] Using the example of Portia and the three caskets, he argues that in this tale there is "a logic proper to good story-telling, rather than a fidelity to the probabilities of real life". He continues,

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15 Simon O. Lesser, Fiction and the Unconscious (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 166. Lesser goes on to describe plot as "the moving tip of the story line" (p. 166), but does not, unfortunately, pursue the idea further.

16 Elizabeth Bowen, "Notes on Writing a Novel", in Collected Impressions (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1950), p. 250.

17 Richmond Lattimore, Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy (London: The Athlone Press, 1964), p. 6.

> A real prince, given the first choice, could so easily have got Portia. Whether because he had brains enough to see that there was no point in hiding her except in the most unlikely place, or whether because her father had double-bluffed and put her in the gold after all - stupid or sharp, he could have carried her off, leaving us, the story's listeners, as frustrated as Bassanio.[18]

What Lattimore calls "the rights of the story", exemplified in this case by Bassanio choosing last and choosing right, are also shown at work in the story of the foundling child. In life as in fiction, he observes, unwanted children are exposed, but in life they seldom survive. In story-telling, however,

> the child exposed is the child saved; he, or she, always survives. If he is not to survive, there is really no point, no dramatic point, in having him exposed at all. But he is thought to have died, and the recognition of his identity is regularly the climax of the story, its moment of truth.[19]

Lattimore suggests that in all narrative literature there are two main story patterns, the truth action and the choice action. In the truth action, of which the story of the foundling child is a good example, we find a situation in which a lie has been imposed upon the dramatic world. The subsequent action is shaped towards the revelation of truth, which can only take place after the lie seems sure to triumph. In a choice action, such as we find in the tale of Portia and the three caskets, the moment of choice is seen as the shape of the

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18 Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy, pp. 6 - 7.

19 ibid., p. 9.

action, that shape usually taking the form of a fork in a road. The forking forces a choice and makes it irrevocable: once one path has been chosen and advance along it begun, the other path is excluded forever.

Why stories should follow these patterns, and who authorized them, Lattimore cannot say. He simply accepts them as fact. The question is, however, an intriguing one. There is no law of life which says that the truth shall always be found out, but only after the lie has had its day; and there is no law of life which says that, having decided, thou shalt not change thy mind. Yet stories are still written and read by reasonably intelligent people who must be aware that there are very persuasive laws of actuality which say that most people are willing to change their minds or accept compromises, and that once a lie has gained sufficient ground it may become, for all intents, the truth. Readers still enjoy Fielding's story of a foundling child who grew up to defy, but only just, the universal opinion that he was born to be hanged. Novelists still write (admittedly, in the case of John Fowles, a little warily) stories about young men who choose to court prostitutes and who find, in the end, that they have discovered a nobility beneath the abused person of their choice.[20] Even hardened realists can appreciate the rights and logic

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20 John Fowles offers two endings for his choice action in The French Lieutenant's Woman. In the first, Charles' commitment to his choice survives the test of anger and bitterness. In the second, he rejects the choice and leaves Sarah, beginning to accept that life is not just "one riddle and one failure to guess it" but that this life of "mysterious laws and mysterious choice" is simply to be endured (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969, p. 445). I would agree with Fowles' assertion that the second ending is no less plausible than the first, but I would also argue that as an ending to a choice story, it is far from satisfactory.

of a good story: when V. K. Ratliff in Faulkner's The Mansion finally arrives at what is for him a satisfactory story of how Eula became pregnant with Linda, his response to his own version of the night's events reflects both the irrational appeal and the sense of necessity in the logic of a good story:

> I don't even insist or argue that it happened that way. I jest decline to have it any other way except that one because there ain't no acceptable degrees between what has got to be right and what jest possibly can be.[21]

In the story that Ratliff proposes to account for Eula's pregnancy, we can perhaps find some explanation of why stories follow the pattern they do, and of what (rather than who) authorizes it. Throughout the trilogy, Eula has come to embody the idea of fecundity. She attracts men like flies: they seem to be able to smell her aura of rich fertility, and they swarm around her. Ratliff fully appreciates Eula's qualities, because he, more than anyone else, realizes how much they are lacking in the rest of this sterile community. For him, she takes on the aspect of Goddess and saviour, and when he learns that she is married to Flem Snopes, his bitterness at this squandering of a potent life-force urges him to reinterpret the pregnancy which forced Flem on Eula as a triumph, rather than a defeat, of fecundity. He decides that those loins of Eula's could have been seeded with a child only at the peak of the bushwhacking incident, when five local boys attacked the buggy in which Eula and

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21 William Faulkner, The Mansion (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p. 122.

the McCarron boy were riding. As he goes over the night's events, he keeps delaying "the ravaging of the citadel", until without even a pause after the violent action, the citadel itself does the ravaging:

> Not no cessation a-tall, not even no active pausing; not jest that maiden bastion capitulate and overrun but them loins themselves seeded, that child, that girl, Linda herself created into life right there in the road with likely Eula to help hold him up offen the broke arm . . .[22]

Ratliff's satisfaction with his story has little to do with its plausibility. As he says earlier, "what jest possibly can be" does not affect what has to be right, and in the story he creates for Eula, he pushes "what jest possibly can be" to the verge of incredibility. But the story-teller, as W. B. Gallie observes, "is not a popular illustrator of established or alleged statistical truths";[23] his concern is with felt, rather than known, consistencies, and he renders events continuous and sequential on the basis of emotional determinants. As far as Ratliff knows, or "as fur as ['the five timorous local stallions'] or Frenchman's Bend either knowed, Eula was already pregnant with Linda" before the night of the bushwhacking.[24]

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22 The Mansion, p. 122.

23 W. B. Gallie, in the chapter entitled "What is a Story?", Philosophy and the Historical Understanding (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964), p. 44.

24 The Mansion, p. 118.

But in order to set his troubled heart at peace, Ratliff creates a sequence of events that is both breath-taking in the uncontrollable momentum of its execution and exhilarating in its last-minute relief of almost insupportable tension. That Eula should be the active partner, that the deed should be done at the last possible moment, as the climax and as the necessary result of action designed specifically to prevent it, may defy both logic and probability, but it makes good emotional sense. The truth of Eula's inviolable fecundity prevails only after the darkest hour because in stories something is proved true by its ability to survive a compelling opposition. Happy endings have to be earned, emotionally.

Ratliff's story provides us with a good working example of the principles upon which story-telling is based. But as an instance of story-telling, his is a special case. Ratliff is his own audience and has no one to convince but himself. Furthermore, he values Eula and all she stands for, and hence her story has for him an inherent significance. Most story-tellers, however, have no such guarantees of success. They are relating, to an unknown and uncommitted audience, events which have no intrinsic bearing on their listeners' concerns. In order to understand why, in these circumstances, stories have the same appeal and offer the same satisfaction as witnessed in Ratliff's response, we need to explore the basic mechanisms involved in following a story.

Forster's definition of story as a kind of narrative involves the rendering of events made continuous by virtue of their adherence to

a time sequence. Waving at us the banner of story bearing the insignia of the "naked worm of time"[25] and the motto, "What happens next?", he taunts us with our inability, on the one hand, to find intelligibility in the novel without being able to hold onto the thread of time that the story offers, and on the other hand, to continue the search for intelligibility without the compensation of having our "primeval curiosity"[26] satisfied.

The response to a sequence through time is an important element in the satisfaction that we find in stories. It is quite a different matter to assert, however, that the sequence is itself determined by temporal relationships. We can accept that one event happens, and then another happens, and then another, without also being forced to accept that the "then" is prescriptive rather than descriptive. "Then" can be related to a movement through time and not necessarily a movement because of time. It is important to make this distinction because on it depends the exact nature of the process involved in following a story - whether it is, in fact, a matter of cognition and based upon the need for intelligibility and the excitement of continuous change, or whether it is ultimately based upon a more fundamental concern which is only reflected in our desire to find out what happens (and not necessarily in the sense of what happens next).

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25 Aspects of the Novel, p. 36.

26 ibid., p. 35.

Forster does not explain further the phenomenon of the "what happens next?" response to a story. One assumes that he is positing an innate response to the condition of ever-present change which the story develops. But an important aspect of this response which he does not satisfactorily explore is the lack of inevitability about our desire to find out what happens next. He does suggest that the story-teller needs the power to play upon the reader's suspense in order to keep his curiosity alive, but this alone is no guarantee of success. It is one thing to keep your reader in doubt as to what is going to happen; it is another to make him want to find out.

Wanting to find out what happens is based quite simply on interest, but it is an interest far removed from intellectual curiosity. When we read a story we are not concerned with "knowing" in the sense of discovering intellectually accessible truths or even in the sense of academic inquisitiveness. We are intent upon "knowing" only as it relates to the condition of people in whom we have an interest. Interest in this sense is less Forster's "idle curiosity" and more the personal concern or commitment that we find in D. W. Harding's definition of interest as "an enduring disposition to respond, in whatever way".[27] The good story-teller must therefore engage (and subsequently retain) his reader's interest, his disposition to respond, in order to make the point of something happening next a motivating concern.

In an investigation of the historical understanding, W. B. Gallie offers an illuminating analysis of the different kind of "understanding"

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27 D. W. Harding, "Psychological Processes in the Reading of Fiction", The British Journal of Aesthetics, II (1962), 134.

that is involved in the following of a story, and in particular, of the special kind of compulsion which is peculiar to this form of narrative. A story-teller's job, he suggests,

> is to present his characters, usually to be sure in a plausible fashion, in situations which are calculated to call out our interest; and this interest is always ultimately based - if we excuse a few types of sophisticated trick-story - on our strongest, most elemental feelings of sympathy with and antipathy for our fellows. It is worth noticing that, once embarked on a good story, we cannot properly be said to choose to follow it. It would be better to say that we are pulled along by it, and pulled at by a far more compelling part of our human make-up than our intellectual presumptions and expectations. We read (or hear) that the lovers are parted, that the child is lost in the forest, and we must hear more about them, we could almost cry out like children "What happened to them next?" . . . there is something arbitrary, something due to the peculiar set and structure of our basic interhuman feelings, involved in the following of any and every story.[28]

I have quoted from Gallie at length in order to show the different light that he throws on the "What happens next" that Forster so disparages. Forster assumes that the question is prompted by a desire for cognitive satisfaction ("curiosity") and confirms the reader's allegiance to "life-in-time" (evident, he suggests, in the "next") rather than "life-by-value".[29] And, he declares, this direction of cognition towards life-in-time can only result in a "slackening of emotion and shallowness of judgement".[30] Gallie,

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28 Philosophy and the Historical Understanding, pp. 44 - 45.

29 Aspects of the Novel, p. 36.

30 ibid., p. 45.

on the other hand, is suggesting a direct relationship between the desire to find out what happens next and "the peculiar set and structure of our basic interhuman feelings", and is by implication suggesting its relationship with a very different set of values, by having the "following" impulse depend not upon the excitement of a desire to pursue one thing after another over time but upon "the power to enlist certain peculiarly human feelings".[31]

Harding also relates interest to this same enlistment of human feeling. He sees the reader's disposition to respond to the events of a story as depending upon our perception of the events as happening to living people whom the reader values as fellow human beings and whose feelings the reader can imagine. While I would disagree with Harding's assertion that the characters themselves have to be human, the characters, like Toad in The Wind in the Willows, do have to have the capacity to respond to and be affected by experience in a characteristically human way. In order to establish a bond of human sympathy, we must be able to assume, in advance of specific situations, that the character will be affected by life in a similar way to the reader.

The presentation of characters whom the reader can imagine to have feelings similar to his own creates the potential for the formation of the sympathetic relationship between reader and characters. Its actual manifestation depends upon two things: the

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31 Philosophy and the Historical Understanding, p. 48.

first is a product simply of the mechanics of the literary text; the second is a product of the story-teller's ability to structure the reader's experience.

The terms of the reader's relationship to the literary text are initially determined by quite elementary things such as the size of the work, the form in which it is delivered (indirectly as opposed to dramatically, for example), its "voice", and the extent of presentational interdependence between author and work. The reader makes contact with a story primarily through character and event. Its length works against the reader's prolonged consideration of the refinements of language, as does the story's usual medium of prose, which does not often attempt to draw attention to itself for extended periods of time. There are, of course, exceptions. Stories need not be long, and they can be in verse, but in most cases such variations are put to a purpose which is outside the particular demands of story-telling. We tend to linger over stories and, unless we have an ulterior motive, we tend to put them in prose. The exceptions are usually the result of a need to take into account such extraneous considerations as the attention span of an audience listening to an oral rendition, the requirements of current literary decorum, or the desire to create supplementary effects such as incantation or the authority of tradition. In addition to the directing of attention which this diminution of specific language interest encourages, we have the effect of the story-telling voice, with its usual insistence on a secondary role as background in relation to the matter it is presenting. Such fundamental aspects

as these, in a sense almost physical attributes of the medium, will direct the reader to the work's most profitable area of contact and to the terms of that contact.

It is probably necessary at this stage to make quite clear the exact nature of the importance to be attached to character and event in story. It is in no way suggested that either character or event is important in itself, that the "key" to the story lies in our understanding of the way this or that character works, or in the interpretation of the significance of this or that event in the context of an overall meaning. In a somewhat lyrical and passionate article, "Story-tellers vs Novelists", Frank Norris pinpoints the story-teller's relation to his characters and events:

> The men and women of his world are not apt to be - to him - so important in themselves as in relation to the whirl of things in which he chooses to involve them. They cause events, or else events happen to them, and by an unreasoned instinct the story-teller preserves his consistencies. . . . Devil-may-care, slipshod, melodramatic, but invincibly persuasive he uses his heart, his senses, his emotions, every faculty but that of the intellect. He does not know, he feels.[32]

In the story that Ratliff created for Eula, we saw all these characteristics - with the exceptions of the devil-may-care and slip-shod. With an "unreasoned instinct", Ratliff painstakingly "preserved his consistencies", involving Eula in "the whirl of things". Why Eula's fate should matter so much to him, what her

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32 Frank Norris, "Story-tellers vs Novelists", in The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris, D. Pizer, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 67.

triumph should mean in the context of the action as a whole, may be interesting and even valid questions to be asked after the event, as it were. These interests are not, however, integral to the story's operation. Ratliff simply values Eula and cares about what happens to her, and although in most stories this concern is a product of the story, it is not a product of the particular details of the story. It is rather the result of a basic structure common to all stories. This structure, or pattern, transforms the potential for sympathetic involvement inherent in the creation of characters whom the reader can value as human into an active shaping force in the reader's experience of narrative literature.

As we begin to read a story we have a minimal knowledge of the characters involved and even less of the events with which they are concerned. But what we do have, in every case, and irrespective of the point in the narrative where the author chooses to begin, is a sense of instability or unease.[33] We are not uneasy, however, because of insufficient knowledge. Our unease is the result of the context in which the knowledge we do have is presented. Our knowledge is qualified by an emotional undertone that serves two purposes: it initiates movement and hence, in the reader, the impulse to follow it, and it initiates the fulfilment of an emotional pattern which is in itself aesthetically pleasing.

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33 This characteristic of a story's beginning is in marked contrast to the state of equilibrium that Tzvetan Todorov sees as the initial stage of a plot ("Structural Analysis of Narrative", Novel, III, 1969, 75).

It is the emotional pattern which is the defining characteristic of the story. It is common to all stories in whatever genre they appear, it forms the basis of the story's appeal, and it lays the groundwork for its structure. In simplest terms, the pattern is one of initial uneasiness followed by the increasing of tension to a climax which in turn generates a feeling of relief or satisfaction. Whatever the story, the same pattern applies. The same story can be told with countless variations - its incidents can, if the writer chooses, be connected and reconnected in plots which are obedient to whatever laws the writer may subscribe to, it may be begun in the middle, at the end, in the future, or three generations into the past - but the pattern will remain the same. If we choose to begin our story with those events which conclude the action, for example, we must still create in our reader the same sense of uneasiness, even if based on different grounds, as would occur had we begun the action at its beginning. The beginning of a story has less to do with introductory exposition than it has with the state of its audience's nervous system, just as the end of a murder story has less to do with discovering the killer than it has with settling perturbed feelings.[34]

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[34] Alfred Hitchcock's film, Frenzy, is a good example. The killer is known to the audience midway through the film, but is not caught until the hero has endured further torment. Catching the killer is a means of relieving further torment rather than a means of removing doubt. This is in sharp contrast to most traditional murder mysteries, which are constructed almost totally on the basis of plot, and in which the end is "knowing" the killer.

The pattern of rising unease to climax and satisfaction may seem to bear a striking resemblance to the conventional dramatic structure of the well-made play. The similarity is neither coincidental nor copied. The well-made play offers a rarefied and compressed example of the story-telling pattern coinciding with the design of the plot, and the particular satisfaction which this structure offers has its origins not in the niceties of geometrical relationships but rather in the resolution of emotional weights and tensions in conjunction with the resolution of the intellectual design.

If we borrow (from John Barth's Chimera) Jerome Bonaparte Bray's computerized perfection of the schema for the rise and fall of dramatic action, the similarity becomes obvious:

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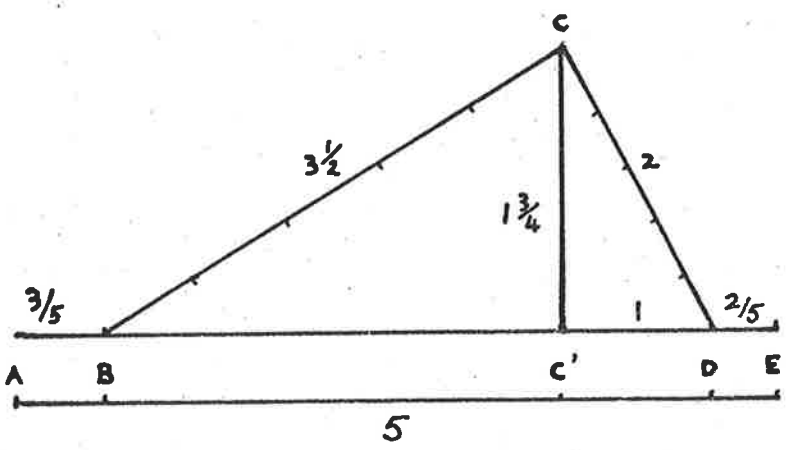

A - B, the exposition, corresponds to the establishment of unease in the story; B - C, the rising action, relates to the development of tension, with C being the climax; C - D, the denouement, can be compared with the story's resolution of tension; and D - E, the rounding off, compares with the story's culminating sense of

35 John Barth, Chimera (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1972), p. 261.

satisfaction. At this stage we might be tempted to see the relationship as causative, with plot determining the kinds of effects which I have been arguing are the responsibility of story. But this hypothesis does not stand up when we consider how often plot and story are at variance with each other.

The kind of plot examined above is a direct reflection of the story's emotional groundwork and its use in narrative literature is usually indicative of the special effect that the writer wishes to make. Plot functions as a vehicle of intellectual meaning, and when it follows closely the contours of the emotional pattern, the effect is to make intellectual meaning an emotional concern. This is perhaps why tragedy so often takes this form: our minds and emotions are asked to work together to produce a conclusion whose inevitability and sense of rightness is the result of a conjunction of both areas of experience.

Comedy, on the other hand, very often insists on their disjunction. Contrary to the widely held belief that comedy requires emotional distancing, the very reverse is true. Comedy depends as much on an emotional response as tragedy does. The difference lies in the disjunction between the conclusions drawn from it and those drawn from our perceptual efforts. In comedy the plot and the emotional pattern are usually at loggerheads - which fact alone might explain the relative difficulty people have when trying to re-tell the "story" of a comedy as compared with the "story" of a tragedy.[36] In the latter, the movement of the plot is more often in step with the story, with the result that a description of that one structure usually describes both.

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[36] Re-telling the "story" of a narrative means for most people piecing together the material action.

Comedy presents more problems in this regard, both because of this disjunction and because of the degree of elaboration which comic plots seem to enjoy. The combination in Tom Jones of what many consider to be the perfect comic plot with a variation on one of the oldest and most compelling stories produces a fine example of the kind of effect this mixing of structural forms can create, and it is one which I will discuss in detail in a later chapter.

If we return to the story patterns that Richmond Lattimore suggests are evident in all narrative literature, we can see why, in the light of the above, action follows the shape it does. It is not the abstract importance of the particular choice nor the quality of the hidden truth which determines the pattern but the necessities of our emotional commitment. The need for choice or the existence of a hidden truth renders the dramatic world unstable, but counterbalancing the instability is the positive force of the reader's involvement through his sympathy with and antipathy to certain characters. As the story progresses, the instability inherent in the initial situation is replaced by one that arises out of the opposition between the action after choice or in search of truth, and the desires regarding the outcome which are the result of our involvement. The instability is resolved when our sympathies are satisfied.

In Chimera, John Barth's Genie in search of the key to the nature of narrative promises Dunyazade that he will try with all his heart to find a conclusion for her story which is in keeping with his affection for her.[37] He voices what all readers seek from their stories, for

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[37] Chimera, p. 41.

we must all be aware at the end of a story of the feeling of, and satisfaction with, the sense of "rightness" as the events cohere and draw to a close. When the hero is tottering on the edge of a scaffold with a rope strung round his neck and the cavalry (or the film version of Squire Western) come charging over the hill in time to cut the rope from his neck before he reaches the end of his fall, it is not the law of averages which decides whether he should begin to swing or not. But the decision is none the less satisfying, whatever the degree of our intellectual dissent. There can be no sense, or need, in telling a story in which our hero is hanged, with everybody, including the reader, deciding at the last minute that he probably deserved it anyway. If he does deserve it, the conclusion must be inherent in what has gone before, and must have had an effect upon the kind of sympathy we have for him. It would have been as monstrous for the reader to have found Tom hanged as it would have been not to have found Clarissa dead, for example. If we love our hero for his humanity, we expect to find him fulfilling our love by a climactic expression of humanity. If we love our heroine for being more than human, we can expect to find the fulfilment of that commitment in her death, the ultimate rejection of the merely human. The kind of sympathy which is developed will determine the kind of ending which is acceptable.

There are, of course, instances which defy this connection between sympathy and event. In the modern novel, for example, there is an increasing tendency for the cavalry to be on recreation leave when it is needed, or to go charging over the wrong hill, or inadvertently to assist in the destruction of our hero, and often his family and

friends as well.[38] The bias of the present age towards rationality and things intellectual in its literature has led many novelists and critics to suspect that the necessary, and in its own way logical, end of a story is escapist and irresponsible, an insult to the intelligence. And in many ways it is. Story is irresponsible in failing to impress on the reader actual and implicit consequences of behaviour and decisions, and escapist in deliberately engaging the reader in the pursuit of satisfactions which are unrelated to the normal expectations that he has of life. And it insults the intelligence by blatantly ignoring it. But at the same time as we acknowledge the story's deficiencies in one direction, we should be aware of its intention, and achievement, in another. The story is less responsible to our intelligence than to our feelings, and while it escapes the judgements of everyday life, it upholds those of our sympathetic humanity. Its values, and by inference those of the people who use it or surrender to it, are first and foremost humane.

There are very few narratives today, apart from those belonging to our childhood, which can rely entirely on the energies associated with the story pattern. The rise of romance in the twelfth-century saw the beginnings of the distinctly "modern" approach to narrative, with its insistence on rational as well as emotional sequence. Plot,

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38 Thomas Berger's Little Big Man is both an excellent example of this kind of defiance and an excellent, though under-rated, novel. The defiance is also thematically functional in that it reflects the denial of basic human values evident in society - and particularly evident in the cavalry.

as the vehicle of rationality in the structure of narrative, came to assume a more and more important role, and a narrative scholar would do well to acknowledge its influence as a source of order and meaning in narrative. But at the same time it would seem imperative that due homage is paid to story, that other principle of design which has very little to do with rationality and which exists in a volatile and even intimidating union with it. From its very beginnings the novel has clung to its affinity with story-telling, not simply because a good story cleverly disguises hard moral and intellectual lessons as fine entertainment, but because a good story, well told, can itself be a lesson. Its effective operation on the reader's consciousness will tell him what it means to be human by compelling him, through his sympathetic involvement, to be humane. When Fielding, in the introductory chapter to Book IX of Tom Jones, urged as a prerequisite of those "who lawfully may . . . write such Histories as this" the ability "To invent good Stories, and to tell them well" (IX, i),[39] he was asking novelists to cultivate a narrative impulse which has helped bring man out of the cave.

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39 Henry Fielding, The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, ed. Martin C. Battestin and Fredson Bowers, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), I, p. 488.

CHAPTER 2

Story and Plot

One of the major contributions of the twentieth century to narrative criticism has been the technical analysis of the concept of plot and its function as an organizational force in the novel. The interest in plot shown by such able and influential critics as Edwin Muir, R. S. Crane and Frank Kermode has thrown valuable light on the significance of narrative sequence as a source, rather than simply a container, of meaning.[1] As an element of this sequence, plot plays an important part in our understanding of novels - many would say the most important part - and we should be grateful for the redirection of critical emphasis which has resulted from these and similar studies.

It will be obvious from the preceding chapter that my support for this emphasis is not total, but my reservations have their origin not in the re-evaluation of the function of plot itself but in the tendency to usurp, in the process of this re-evaluation, the roles of other facets of narrative structure under this single concept. Because plot works so well in the novel it is tempting to see it as both the essential structural force in the novel and as an indispensable part

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1 Edwin Muir, The Structure of the Novel (London: The Hogarth Press, 1928); R. S. Crane, "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones"; Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

of narrative art in general. It is interesting and enlightening to follow the subtle changes undergone by the definitions of plot as critics began to recognize its value to the novel. As the importance of its role became increasingly apparent, so its definition sought to express a greater significance and wider application.

Until the nineteen-fifties, literary definitions of plot rely upon its relation to its non-specific usage as a plan or scheme. The Oxford English Dictionary cites Lewis in 1852 using plot in a work of fiction to mean "a certain connexion of events", and this usage remained consistent well into the twentieth century. On the whole, dictionaries of literary terms published before the nineteen-sixties (and I could find only one possible exception[2]) define plot in terms of this outline or framework of events. Various subtleties of reference began to refine the skeletal characteristic of this type of definition as early as the nineteen-twenties, but the principal term of reference, the aspect of framework, still remained. E. M. Forster (1927), for example, states that the connection of the events must be causal and sequential.[3] Edwin Muir (1928) suggests that the plot designates "the chain of events in a story and the principle which knits it together."[4] Joseph T. Shipley's Dictionary of World Literary Terms (1943) is content with the framework of incidents, as is Duffy

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2 The possible exception is M. H. Abrams' A Glossary of Literary Terms. The work has gone through three editions, and this makes accurate dating difficult.

3 Aspects of the Novel, pp. 95-6.

4 The Structure of the Novel, p. 16.

and Pettit's A Dictionary of Literary Terms (1951), but both add the condition that the framework constitutes an artistic unit or whole. Much the same sort of artistic reference is implied in Barnet, Berman and Burto's A Dictionary of Literary Terms (1960), where plot is defined as the sequence of events as the author arranges them. It is possible to infer from these slight changes of emphasis a gradual awareness of the author's conscious control of the order of his events, but the general conception of plot is still bound to its mimetic potential: it is understood to be a reflection of a meaning contained in the events and not a source of meaning in itself.

The more comprehensive definitions of plot seem to be at first associated with a change in reference from the general non-specific usage as a plan or outline to its particular usage inferring a controlling purpose or design (plot in the sense of connive, for example). In M. H. Abrams' A Glossary of Literary Terms (1941; 1957; 1971) we find an early example of this special orientation, and it seems heavily indebted to the current understanding of Aristotle's Poetics: plot in a dramatic or narrative work is seen as a method of structuring action in order to achieve certain emotional and artistic effects. Instead of the emphasis falling on the artist's ability to recreate an order which is apparently evident in the observable world (for example, chronological or causal), it now falls on his ability to create a pattern whose order produces (rather than reflects) meaning. The sense of purpose behind this concept of plot is admirably expressed in Elizabeth Bowen's eminently simple definition of plot as "the knowing of destination".[5] Dictionaries of literary terms published in the

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5 "Notes on Writing a Novel", p. 249.

last few years seem to prefer this qualification of the plan with the intention of accomplishing a purpose. A. F. Scott's Current Literary Terms (1965) goes so far as to derive plot from the French complot, meaning conspiracy.

Added to this refinement of the kind of order which plot is seen to bring to narrative, is an extension of the scope of reference of the term "action". As the concept of plot as patterned action developed beyond the limitations of mimesis towards an independent meaning under the conscious control of the artist, so the term "action" came to encompass not simply human action or events, but also "verbal" action, the relationship of different parts and aspects of the work to the whole. R. S. Crane, for example, has defined plot as "the particular temporal synthesis effected by the writer of the elements of action, character, and thought",[6] and he goes on to suggest that it is this synthesis of human and verbal actions which accomplishes the plot function of affecting opinions and emotions. Alvin B. Kernan further extends the concept of action to apply to "that aspect of a literary work which involves movement and the relationship of parts occurring at different points of time".[7]

I have no serious quarrel with the direction plot critism has taken. My main objections are to the indiscriminate application of our twentieth-century understanding of plot to all periods and all forms of narrative, and to the related tendency to draw conclusions about an entire work from assumptions based on an analysis of its plot.

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6 "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones", p. 620.

7 Alvin B. Kernan, The Plot of Satire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 100.

It is important to retain an awareness that our concept of plot satisfies the needs of our own age: the desire to find an intellectual pattern, or even meaning in narrative is a characteristic of a certain quality of mind, rather than of the narrative process itself. The narrative structures of epic and romance, for example, will be explored in later chapters, but my immediate concern is with the second aspect of my objection to the current understanding of plot, and in particular with the obstacles it presents to a full appreciation of story. The problem can best be isolated by considering a specific instance of one story and a critic's analysis of its function.

Irvin Ehrenpreis, in a sensitive and perceptively argued critique of Tom Jones, observes that

> In Tom Jones the novelist can be said to employ his whole story as a device for teaching the reader to act with prudence in arriving at moral judgements.[8]

If we examine the action of the novel, Ehrenpreis would seem to be perfectly justified in making this assertion. Tom, the energetic, carefree and impulsive young hero, has extreme difficulty in acquiring as wife the charming, wise and prudent woman whom he loves and who loves him, and Tom's difficulties always seem to be related to his impulsiveness or lack of that prudence so admirably displayed by Sophia. Furthermore, if, as Ehrenpreis himself has done, we examine the effect of the novel upon the reader, we can see the same necessity for prudence asserting itself. By his use of "false clues, evasions

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8 Irvin Ehrenpreis, Fielding: *Tom Jones* (London: Edward Arnold, 1964), p. 50.

and omissions", Fielding reveals our own "susceptibility to error" and instils in us the desirability of acting and judging with due discretion.[9]

This is what Ehrenpreis sees as the function of "the whole story". Yet if the effect of story depends, as I have argued, on our involvement with the protagonist, it is very difficult to reconcile Ehrenpreis's conclusion with the fact that this particular protagonist achieves his goal without acting prudently, and having never made a moral judgement. Furthermore, if we can judge by the continuing popularity of the novel, a great many readers have found it perfectly fitting that he should do so.

If we begin to explore Ehrenpreis's argument further, however, we can understand why there is this apparent discrepancy between the conclusions to be drawn, and the way Fielding embodies his ideas in character and action. In the chapter entitled "Story" Ehrenpreis begins by acknowledging that

> In the plot of Tom Jones as in the style Fielding evidently looked for symmetry and clarity as virtues peculiarly to be desired. That the final achievement has always seemed splendid is the impression one gets from the centuries of praise devoted to this aspect of the novel. 'What a master of composition Fielding was!' said Coleridge. 'Upon my word, I think the Oedipus Tyrannus, the Alchemist and Tom Jones the three most perfect plots ever planned.' Most critics quoting Coleridge's eulogy take it to point at the elaborate articulation of Fielding's chain of events. Although the quantity of separate episodes seems enormous, they do, as a matter of fact, fall into extremely well-defined parts: six 'books' for the country, six for the road, and six for the city,

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9 Fielding: *Tom Jones* , p. 50.

> totalling a figure which stands midway between the twenty-four books of Homer's epic and the twelve of Virgil's, so that the very number suggests a new genre derived from the heroic tradition.[10]

Ehrenpreis ends the same chapter by suggesting that

> The flood of . . . ironies streaming through the book, 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--surely these effects supplied the true inspiration for Coleridge's praise. Like Oedipus Rex, like the Alchemist, Tom Jones can be said to derive its most brilliant and bold effects from the concealment of a simple but far-reaching truth that we never fully appreciate until the 'plot' has been solved.[11]

In between that acknowledgement and that suggestion has been, not a discussion of story, but a re-examination of the concept of plot. Ehrenpreis draws a distinction between the mechanical plot structure and the "effective 'plot'", the latter being determined by "instants of recognition" rather than by action in its more obviously material sense.[12] It is largely on the basis of the effective plot, and its re-enactment in the reader during the process of reading the novel, that Ehrenpreis comes to his conclusion about the function of "the whole story".

As far as it pertains to plot, Ehrenpreis's argument seems perfectly sound, and if the ramifications of his neglect of story extended no further than to a blurring of terminological distinctions, the matter could, with a few regrets, be dropped. But while it is possible, with a little resigned forbearance, to learn to live with

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[10] Fielding: *Tom Jones*, p. 16.

[11] ibid., pp. 23-4.

[12] ibid., p. 23.

the practice of using one term when two would seem more profitable, it becomes more disturbing when the appreciation of a novelist's artistry suffers because of it. If, as Ehrenpreis suggests, the function of the whole story in Tom Jones is to teach the reader to act with prudence in reaching moral judgements, then Fielding, by his presentation of the protagonist, has chosen a distinctly questionable way of going about it. It can, of course, be argued that the reader must realize that Fielding is blatantly playing God in his novel, and that therefore something more than carefree impulsiveness is required to achieve a happy ending in real life. But the fact remains that Fielding has chosen a very unreliable method of instilling his moral lesson. Just how unreliable can be seen by examining a fable which does have as its lesson the dangers of carefree impulsiveness.

The fable of the grasshopper and the ant has been with us for a long time and has been rendered in many languages. Three of these renditions, by Aesop, La Fontaine, and Krylov, are of particular relevance because while they all handle the same subject, their treatment of it, and the resultant effects, differ. In discussing them in the context of Ehrenpreis's argument on Tom Jones, I have no wish to oversimplify his conclusions; I am merely trying to isolate a particular concern which a concentration on plot often obscures. A fable lays its claim to our interest as a particularization of a readily identifiable generality on a moral aspect of human life. The fabulist makes his appeal, grounds his argument, and offers his proof to the reader's perceptual faculty, and to effect this most

fully he must rule out as far as possible interference from the reader's passions. As G. E. Lessing has noted, "The fabulist deals only with our perceptions, not with our passions."[13] We should remember that the novelist makes no such limitations.

Of particular interest in respect of Ehrenpreis's argument is the fabulist's preference for animals and inanimate objects over people. By his use of animals and inanimate objects the fabulist can localize the emotional response of his audience. We can be stirred to compassion for the mishaps of our hero, the sheep, for example, without also involving a generalized commitment to him beyond the particular situation. The compassion serves the role of reinforcing right or wrong in the moral statement being illustrated, but does not extend to the moral character of the sheep himself. Sympathy with a human tends to be more diffuse and less easily focused, so that conscious perception of the moral rule which the fable is illustrating is in danger of being swamped by side issues pertaining to the character. Furthermore, the emotional response is viewed purely as an incidental bonus, and is not intended to influence our judgement.

Despite these precautions, fabulists are not always successful in eliminating distracting influences. La Fontaine's "The Grasshopper and the Ant" is such a case. In this lyrical treatment of the fable, La Fontaine does not deviate markedly from the substance of Aesop's

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13 G. E. Lessing, quoted in Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky, The Psychology of Art (Cambridge, Mass.: The M. I. T. Press, 1971), p. 103. The terms, "lyrical fable" and "prosaic fable" are also taken from Vygotsky.

prosaic version. The grasshopper's careless pleasure has left her unprepared to face a barren winter, and having lived her life exclusively to one end, it is with supreme logic that the ant can tell her she now has the chance to finish it the same way:

> Now's your chance,
> Mistress Grasshopper, to dance.[14]

The problem with La Fontaine's version of the fable is that he has given the grasshopper enough character to give her situation pathos (she is always polite to Mistress Ant, and does offer to repay the loan), with the result that the moral begins to lose its necessary inevitability. This is further complicated by the fable's rendition in the medium of poetry, which seems to support the grasshopper in her song, again to the detriment of the ant's logic. In this way the non-intellectual values of affective responses are distorting our clear perception of the fable's intent. It is a problem which Aesop's prosaic version never approaches: his cicada has no character, it simply asks for food, and shows no appreciation of either the ant's industry or the logic of the world which it expects to support it.

In the La Fontaine version there is an incongruity between what we feel the fable to be telling us on one level (the intellectual, for example) and what we feel, from the presentation of the protagonist, and from the values the poetry seems to be supporting (those of the irrational and ephemeral, for example), to be inherent in the overall effect of the work. The lyrical fable, however, need not suffer

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[14] La Fontaine, La Fontaine's Fables, trans. Sir Edward Marsh (London: Dent, 1952), p. 3.

artistically from this diversion of interest. Krylov's version of the same fable[15] nicely balances the two antithetical responses. He gives more weight to the grasshopper's poetic appeal by including a lengthier and more sympathetic description of her summertime games, and by writing his verse in trochees to reflect the rhythm of her dance. But he also portrays graphically both the winter's desolation, and less appealing aspects of the grasshopper's frivolous nature - in particular, her complacent expectation of help. Thus, from the very beginning we are made aware of the other faces of summer and light-heartedness, and of the inevitability of their association, in which the ant's final logic culminates. The appeal of the grasshopper and her pleasures is allowed to make itself felt because out of it arises the special poignancy of the invitation to dance at the end. The ant is not malicious, as in La Fontaine's fable; she is merely stating the end of a process which has been inherent in the situation throughout in the continual opposition of the two sets of images. In effect, the two fables are offering two different morals. La Fontaine's is not altogether successful in denying the grasshopper the right to her pleasures, yet still seeks retribution, while Krylov's allows her her pleasure, but insists on her accepting the consequences of the process. In the former the moral lies in our perception of the necessities of the seasonal process; in the latter it lies in the contrast and balance of the images of opposites.

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15 The fable is variously translated as "The Grasshopper and the Ant" and "The Dragonfly and the Ant".

The three fables all centre on a single action, but the total effect of each is different. If we were to look at each fable purely in terms of the rational argument, we might decide that each was drawing the same conclusion. But if in the lyrical fables we take into account, as we must, the appeal to that part of our being which, in Conrad's words, "is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition",[16] we find subtle but provocative undertones qualifying that conclusion.

In a sense the novel is more closely related to the lyrical fable, despite the latter's poetic medium, than it is to the prosaic fable, in that it is likewise arguing on two levels. It may be teaching a moral lesson, or it may be making a profound observation on life, or it may be gently nudging the reader's conscience, but it is also telling a story, and stories satisfy certain desires and consequently have persuasive powers. These powers can be brought into play to reinforce the rational argument; they can, intentionally or unintentionally, subvert it; or they can qualify it. But they cannot be ignored. To do so is to read, as it were, only half the story, to lose the complex and often disturbing interaction between what we need to be and what we know to be, between the rights of the story and the fidelities of the plot.

The assiduous attention to plot in recent years has had beneficial results in at least one area of the contribution of story to

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16 Joseph Conrad, Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus (London: Dent, 1950), p. viii.

the total effect of the novel - that of reinforcing the rational argument. At this stage I will not quibble about terminology: the effects that the Formalists and the Chicago Critics attribute to plot, I would largely attribute to story, but they rendered narrative criticism a major service in overcoming many of the intimidating consequences of Wimsatt and Beardsley's influential article, "The Affective Fallacy".[17] The carefully detailed and superbly argued studies by the Russian Formalists, by Wayne C. Booth and R. S. Crane, have done much to dispel the stigma of impressionism and relativism that has surrounded criticism which strayed, in whatever genre, from "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement"[18] to the effects of a work, or what it "does".

Formalism is concerned with those techniques which make art persuasive. Victor Shklovsky, for example, defines art as a technique which creates the strongest possible impression, with this impression being the result of the use of those methods (such as poetic imagery, hyperbole, balance, repetition) which emphasize the emotional effect of an expression.[19] The emotional effect serves two functions: that of emphasis or impress, and that of the development of thematic interest. In narrative art, plot is seen as the major vehicle of both impress and thematic interest. In its re-shaping of experience, plot

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17 W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy", in The Verbal Icon (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 21-40.

18 ibid., p. 21.

19 Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, pp. 3-24.

endeavours to make the familiar unfamiliar so that we have to look and think again, and it engages the reader's sympathies so that he will be involved in the development of the theme.

Wayne C. Booth, a member of that school of Formalist criticism known as the "Chicago Critics", offers a slightly different approach to the use of emotion (among other things) to reinforce verbal meaning by emphasizing the rhetorical relationship between author and reader.[20] In the case of R. S. Crane, a founder of the Chicago school, however, Formalism takes a radical step away from the approach to the emotional response as a means to a primarily intellectual end. Crane's particular concern with the emotional response seems to be a by-product of the Chicago Critics' "neo-Aristotelian" interests. Their attempt to develop a formalist criticism concentrating on the artistic principles which govern the construction of literary texts led to an appreciation of Aristotle's special attention to what he termed "mythos", and which modern critics, including the Chicago Critics, like to translate as "plot".[21] Aristotle defined "mythos" as the whole structure of the incidents, interpreting "wholeness" from two viewpoints: that of the elimination of all incidents which did not contribute to the effect which it was desired to produce (this effect being as close as possible to the effect that the situation would

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20 Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

21 L. J. Potts in Aristotle on the Art of Fiction (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1953) argues that "mythos" is better translated by "fable", since by "mythos" Aristotle meant something less abstract than "plot".

produce in its natural form), and that of making one event lead to another from beginning to end.

Crane adapts the spirit of this conception of structure to a modern understanding of plot as a synthesis "with a power to affect our opinions and emotions in a certain way."[22] He suggests that we form certain desires as a result of the ways in which we are affected by the characters and incidents, and that we form certain expectations as a result of our knowledge of these incidents combined with our knowledge that these will be causally related to what is to come. He then goes on to conclude that the force or effect of a literary text will be the product of the complex interaction of these desires and expectations combined with their associated and reinforcing pleasures - the pleasure to be found in all inferential activity and all imitative processes.

With Crane's analysis of the concept of plot, Formalism comes closest to realizing the full potential of the reader's sympathetic involvement as a persuasive force. But Crane's work also makes clear the desirability of insisting on a distinction between story and plot. Plots are the embodiments of that particular kind of selection and ordering in which the mind ideally specializes, and Crane's discussion of the emotional response reflects his preoccupation with plot in that he accounts for the origins of the emotional response in intellectual opinion and moral judgement. In analyzing the plot of Tom Jones, for example, he assumes that our

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22 "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones", p. 621.

sympathy for Tom is a result of our moral estimation of his character and the desires we have for his future are a result of our judgements as to what he deserves. In simple tales, where our sympathies reinforce rather than question, our emotional response may operate in this way from the very beginning to make our sympathy for Tom blatantly amoral.[23] Admittedly, our sympathies do help us to formulate a different kind of morality in Tom Jones, but to consider only the way in which our sympathies might support the plot function which, as Ehrenpreis rightly observes, is to instil the desirability of prudence, is to neglect the finer implications of Fielding's "great, useful and uncommon Doctrine" (XII, viii).[24] By concentrating on plot critics fail to take into account the way in which story may subvert or qualify verbal meaning and to produce a far more complex and conditional response to the text. When story functions as an affective support to plot there is little to be lost by examining the total effect in terms of one concept. But when it assumes a more volatile relationship, it is time to make distinctions. Without them, the effects of story may be seen only as detrimental to the effectiveness of plot.

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23 Our introduction to Tom will be explored in more detail later, but the main points to consider when assessing the kind of sympathy we have for Tom are:
(1) the fact that we are first introduced not to Tom but to the Squire and Miss Bridget Allworthy, and these two characters are specifically presented as objects of our social and moral admiration;
(2) Tom, as a helpless baby, mutely imploring assistance, is then unashamedly presented as the object of our compassion;
(3) he is absent for two books while we learn of his notoriety, and when he returns, the first thing we learn about is the robberies he has committed.

24 Henry Fielding, Tom Jones, II, p. 652 (my italitcs).

While critics have been reluctant to discuss seriously the effect on the novel of the simple activity of story-telling, novelists are becoming increasingly vocal about it. In particular, Iris Murdoch, John Barth, and John Fowles have explored in their novels the compulsion that stories have for people, the kinds of satisfactions they offer, and their disturbing influence on otherwise settled lives.[25] Story-telling is a simple activity, and stories satisfy quite elementary needs, but they also appeal to "that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition--and therefore more permanently enduring".[26] Simplicity is surely no criterion for establishing insignificance, yet, in spite of all the discussion and theorizing on the novel in recent years, there have been only two notable exceptions to the general neglect of story.

In "Story-tellers vs Novelists", Frank Norris set out to isolate what he considers to be that "sense of fiction" which distinguishes between "novelists of composition" - those who succeed by dint of effort, for example George Eliot and Tolstoy - and the effortless, story-telling novelists - those with a sense of fiction, notably Dumas and Conan Doyle.[27] While Norris's article is useful in that it does

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25 In Under the Net and The Bell, Iris Murdoch explores the hold that a story has over a person and the satisfaction of feeling that you are part of a story. In The Unicorn she also deals with the disturbing effect of a "wonderful story" in which the good is "forced into being as an object of desire" and the retreat to the "ordinary familiar world" (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966, p. 268). In Lost in the Funhouse and Chimera Barth explores both the structure and satisfactions of stories, and in The French Lieutenant's Woman and The Ebony Tower Fowles approaches similar questions, though more indirectly.

26 Joseph Conrad, Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, p. viii.

27 Frank Norris, "Story-tellers vs Novelists", in The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris, ed. D. Pizer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 65 - 68.

attempt, as I have noted earlier, to pin-point the essential characteristic of the story-teller, it is of dubious value to an argument for the recognition of story in the novel. For Norris, story-tellers and novelists are two distinct breeds of writers. They both have their relative virtues, but are pursuing activities which are basically inimical He does suggest, however, that were Tolstoy's intellectual power combined with the fiction spirit, we would have the perfect novel. Unfortunately for my argument, he leaves Sir Arthur in the story-telling limbo of "the child vision and the child pleasure", implicitly denying him a similar opportunity for perfection by achieving the "wonderful intellectual grip".

In "Novelists as Story-tellers", Sheldon Sacks is more specifically concerned with the place of story in the novel.[28] Sacks argues persuasively against the idea of story as an "aesthetic deadweight" in the novel. Beginning with a little good-humoured trepidation (in which, as might have been observed, he is not alone), he goes on to suggest the viability of regarding the literary use of story as a critical abstraction that always becomes "something other than story" in its telling. While it cannot be experienced apart from its concrete realization, it is possible to discern in that realization, in the manner of its telling, the kind of story that it is (or, perhaps more precisely, was), and the effect that it has on the work as a whole.

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28 Sheldon Sacks, "Novelists as Story-tellers", Modern Philology, LXXIII (1976), S97-109.

Sack's argument is a complex one, and difficult to summarize, but an indication of the usefulness of his approach can be gained from his study of what he calls a story of fulfilment, realized in a morally significant comic plot, in Jane Austen's Persuasion. One of the criticisms levelled at Persuasion - and, indeed, at Jane Austen's novels in general - is that everything is so predictable. As Sacks points out, we know at the end of chapter three that when Anne Elliot says "with a gentle sigh 'a few months more, and he, perhaps, may be walking here,'" that "the unnamed 'he' is to be her future husband".[29] Sacks argues that this knowledge is not the product of guesswork but of

> the special insight, consequent on reading stories realized as comic plots, that enables [us] to recognize a fate still to be realized in a fictional future while [we] use that knowledge in the interpretation of present aesthetic experience.[30]

Of particular interest to Sacks in this regard are the middle sections of the novel where Jane Austen's talent as a story-telling novelist is more effectively revealed. Jane Austen, he suggests, has the ability

> to tell a simple story in so rich a way that the middle sections--longer than any other part of the novel--create a complete illusion of progression, of a major stage in the movement of Anne Elliot from a state of dignified suffering to complete and significant fulfilment in her promised marriage to Wentworth, though in fact,

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29 "Novelists as Story-tellers", S104.

30 ibid., S104.

> when viewed from the point of view of an analysis of what many people mean by story--merely the material action alone--the crucial middle episodes (except for Wentworth's relatively unimportant entanglement with the Musgrove girl) are absolutely static: they are ordered in a manner designed to reveal as fully as possible the emotional force of Anne Elliot actually in not moving toward an alternative fate to that promised us by the opening three chapters and progressively attained after the accident at Lyme Regis. Of course we can later see that what has been revealed about Anne provides more than adequate grounds for Wentworth's delayed recognition, but that retrospective view fails to explain why in the actual act of reading the static sections we do not feel them as having the quality of a digression, or why we can interpret so insignificant an act as removing an annoying nephew from Anne's neck as a crucial promise of what is to come, or why--in short--we incorporate it as an integral part of that story told in that way. To put the point differently, Jane Austen had learned that an integral part of a plot need not in fact add to the material progression of the story she is telling just so long as it is intuitively relevant to the power of that story.[31]

The main point on which my argument and Sacks's differs is that concerning the extent of the effective operation of story in the novel. Although Sacks argues that Jane Austen - among others - is a great novelist because she is a great story-teller, he sees plot, "the special potentiality of the story as told",[32] as responsible for most of the power of story. While I would agree with Sacks that plot can contribute to the effect of story in the novel (and in a later chapter I will discuss, in the case of Tom Jones, the way in which Tom's ability to survive the compelling opposition of the plot earns him

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31 "Novelists as Story-tellers", S105 (footnote omitted).

32 ibid., S108.

a happy ending for his story), I would also argue that story is an autonomous functional entity whose effects, largely emotional and intuitive, do not necessarily depend on plot.

Sacks's discussion of the middle sections of Persuasion is especially interesting in terms of my thesis in that it raises one of the most fundamental elements of story-telling. In terms of "material progression", the middle sections of all stories are in a sense static. Except in those stories where we need time to realize what we really do want to happen, the middle section is mainly concerned with making us aware of just how much we really desire the promised end. In many novels - and certainly in Persuasion - it is plot that performs this function, so that what is morally significant to the plot becomes emotionally significant to the story. In the history of narrative, however, this is a comparatively recent development, and if we look briefly at epic and romance we may find a perspective on story which is not clouded by the shadow of plot.

CHAPTER 3

Narrative Structure in Epic and Romance

In a plot events are joined one to another so that they gain significance by their relationship to a developing meaning. The links can be chronological or causal or simply rational in a vague, undefined way, but they are ultimately meant to be "meaningful". The principle of selectivity which produces the continuous sequence essential to narrative is based on this sense of a relationship to a meaning. In the novel we find plot operating in this way as one source of order and sequentiality, but in the epic we are confronted with a sequence which owes little to the constructive principle of rationality. If we accept that the characteristic response to a rational sequence is the impulse to seek meaning, it will soon become evident on reading such works as The Epic of Gilgamesh, the Homeric epics, and Beowulf that this response is inadequate and to some extent undesirable. There is no more characteristic feature of epic than the awareness that its characters inhabit a world where action is significant in itself. Action is perpetrated with the connivance of the gods, but it is performed by men who are sure of their relationship to the world and of their appropriate responses to it. Odysseus's will for home is a fact of his existence; his resolute surmounting of the obstacles with which he is confronted testifies to the strength of his conviction, and his triumphant and

tumultuous return home guarantees the rightness of his endeavours. In a novelistic situation, obstacles tend to question rather than reinforce the direction of the action, as do climactic bloodbaths, because action is itself problematic. But in an epic situation, questions are answered before they can be raised. We know at the start that Odysseus will return home, that Troy will fall, that Gilgamesh must be content with worldly heroics. The consequent action serves only to impress us with the rightness that it should be so.

The aspect of foreknowledge in the epic can be a trying one for those who feel that the desire to know "what happens next" is determined by intellectual curiosity. G. E. Duckworth's thorough investigation of the manner in which Homer, Apollonius and Virgil prepare the reader in advance for the results of the various actions shows quite clearly the difficulties into which the modern reader's expectations of uncertainty and suspense will lead him.[1] If "knowing" in the sense of satisfying academic inquisitiveness is to be an end rather than a beginning of narrative, then such foreknowledge should imply a lessening of interest and a decrease in the effectiveness of the epic. Similarly, the presentation of characters who are in a modern sense "flat", who do not change or develop throughout the length of the work, should also be considered as a defect since, from the point of view of our knowledge of them, nothing happens. No unseen depth of Odysseus's character is revealed: certainly his

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1 G. E. Duckworth, Foreshadowing and Suspense in the Epics of Homer, Apollonius and Vergil (New York: Haskell House, 1966).

confidence in his ability to persevere does waver a little, but this does not result in the revelation of a more complex quality of spirit. Beowulf remains constant in his intentions, even in his final defeat. Gilgamesh returns home with his thirst for immortality unsatisfied but with the character which encompasses that thirst unchanged. Achilleus's wrath does subside into a grudging forgiveness, but the forgiveness is of a piece with the essential nobility of character which precipitated the wrath. In terms of our knowledge, therefore, there can be little sense of sequence, and if we agree for the moment that the significant quality of the action itself (which will be further explored later in the chapter) forestalls the impulse to search for meaning, then we are left with a narrative which must find the foundations of its sequentiality elsewhere.

Sequence cannot exist without movement, and, despite the absence of a developing knowledge of character or of the outcome of events as a goal toward which the reader travels, there is certainly a sense of movement independent of mere chronology evident in the epic. Gilgamesh, The Iliad, The Odyssey, and Beowulf all begin in a state of anxiety or unease. Gilgamesh is tormented by the conflict between his desires as a god and his destiny as a man. The Iliad begins with a quarrel. At the beginning of The Odyssey we are told of Odysseus's longing for his wife and homecoming, and of the unnatural and disordered state of affairs at his home. Beowulf begins with the disruption of a well-ruled people by the unhappy monster, Grendel. And all four end in a state of peace and concord: Gilgamesh ends with his return to Uruk and his admiration of his purely worldly

accomplishments; The Iliad ends with tears and the quiet mourning for Hector; The Odyssey ends with the (perhaps too abrupt) reconciliation of Odysseus's enemies; and Beowulf ends with lamentation and praise for Beowulf.

It may at first seem that a funeral does not represent a state of peace, that its association with a sense of loss would tend to distort any feeling of harmony and resolution. But the principal effect of the funerals at the end of The Iliad and Beowulf, and of the appendage to Gilgamesh, The Death of Gilgamesh, is not one of grief, but of a constructive response to grief. And it is in this kind of response that we may discover the distinctive quality of sequentiality in the epic.

It is possible to look at what I referred to earlier as significant action as action which incorporates in its expression a response to itself. It is a ritualized experience where, for example, we do not respond with grief but to grief. Whereas in a novel we feel unease, or doubt, or tension, or grief by a direct involvement with the characters in an action which must eventually be known and understood in its entirety at the end, in an epic we are asked to respond to unease, doubt, tension, or grief as qualities which are an intrinsic part of separate moments of the action. We cannot ourselves feel, for example, the same kind of doubt as the characters feel because we are not, in fact, in doubt. We know, but we still respond to the presence of doubt.

Much has been said and written on the quality of epic as ritual, and much of it is, I think, misleading in its concentration on the sense

of the religious as a product of the ritual intent. The ritualistic nature of epic seems to make much more sense if it is approached from the point of view of the responses elicited from those who participate in it, rather than from the point of view of the "meaning" it entails. If we look at ritual as the participation in a prescribed order of performance that evokes certain kinds of responses, we are, I think, closer to the distinctive characteristic of epic. A direct response to problematic action may vary with the individual, with context, and with time. But the kind of response associated with epic should retain a high degree of stability, since action is already interpreted. Heroic action is the realization of values subscribed to by the community as a whole, so that such action carries with it its own qualifications. The reader's reaction in these circumstances assumes the same kind of inevitability as the liturgical response: so long as the writer succeeds in endowing his characters with an imaginative life, the response of a reader to the grief, frustration, tension or harmony evoked by efforts to realize those values follows as a matter of course.

An order based on these responses can negate the necessity for one based, for example, on plot. The lack of a steady advance, of an action moving forward in meaningful steps, need not indicate a deficiency in epic such as eighteenth-century novelists saw. The action may move backwards and forwards, leave gaps, be repeated from different points of view, or be loosely connected in terms of cause-and-effect or chronology, without implying that there is no systematic connection of events. The transitions are felt rather than

reasoned, and have their basis in the kind of response which will span the passage between unease and its resolution.

In The Odyssey, for example, the principle which governs the major portion of the narrative is one of retardation of the action, and the object of this retardation is an increase in tension. But it is tension of a special kind. The reader knows that Odysseus will return home after his trials, and that the suitors will be punished, so that the tension is not "real" in the sense of a direct response to a thwarting of expectations. It is an emotion which is "purified", purged of the unpleasant effects which such an emotion would produce in real life.[2] It can thus be maintained for a considerable period of time without the reader seeking release from it by resorting to an awareness of the fictive nature of the experience. In this way it is both more "real" than the emotion produced by involvement in other fictions, and less "real" in its dissociation from the disturbing quality of the actual experience.

In The Odyssey, then, such tension is engendered by impeding the flow of the action towards its known end, with the object of bridging the movement from unease at the beginning to peace at the end. The tension in a way justifies the preceding and subsequent responses, as indeed the middle of any effective narrative order justifies its beginning and end. The end of any well-made narrative must be

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2 "Purification" is here used in a different sense from that intended in Aristotle's Poetics, where it refers to the artist's reconstruction of tragic actions involving blood relations in order to rid them of their morally repulsive character.

immanent (though not necessarily apparent) in its beginning. The trials, misdirections, explanations and doubts of the middle justify the separation of beginning and end - justify, in fact, the temporality of the medium.

Even in Beowulf, where the middle seems strangely absent in the abrupt transition between the two parts of the work, we can see the same kind of effect in operation. Beowulf is in a sense one long middle movement which tries to capture in the static and cubic nature of its presentation man's brief moment of light between the darkness that lies outside the funerals at each end of the narrative. Here the known presence of Beowulf's final destruction is a constant undercurrent qualifying the value of the action, and the response to this implied threat is a longing for the light to be eked out as long as possible. The separation of beginning and end is still producing tension, simply because of an awareness that this one moment is being stretched by the magnitude of its action.

It is understandable that tragic actions should operate in this way to pleasurable effect, but it is not entirely clear why we should enjoy the retardation of a desired end. The prolongation of unease and the intensification of tension are associated with most temporal pleasures and the nature of their special attraction has long been a contentious issue.[3] I can claim no new and definitive insight into

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[3] The exact nature of this particular pleasure seems to me to be complicated by the fact that nightmares seem to be concerned almost entirely with middles, with apparently no beginnings or ends. And the "middleness" quality of nightmares extends not simply to their beginning in the midst of things; they share the emotional attributes of middles - the prolongation of unease and the increasing tension - as well.

a subject which is still occupying psychological and philosophical circles, but I would suggest that the satisfactions of the epic story are similar to those associated with the satisfaction of any appetite, and they follow a similar pattern. (It must be obvious, for example, that the pattern I have suggested for story could equally well describe the process of satisfaction of gastronomic or sexual appetite.) Whatever the peculiarly human mechanisms involved may be, for my purposes it is enough to recognize that the phenomenon exists and plays a decisive role in the appreciation of stories.

In this respect epic stories are no different from romance or novel stories. The difference between the genres seems to lie in the relative significance of other patterns in the control of the narrative. And it is on these grounds that I wish to justify what must seem the rather blatant exclusion of Virgil's Aeneid from what was meant to be a representative sample of epic.

At the beginning of The Aeneid the poet tells us that this will be "a tale of arms and of a man"[4] and in this respect it would seem difficult to distinguish his work from that of his Homeric predecessor(s) or the later Beowulf poet. Like The Odyssey, this is a tale dominated by the will for home, but it is a will for home with a difference. For it is not only a tale of arms and a man, but also the tale of the foundations of a homeland: Virgil goes on to tell us that Aeneas at last "succeeded in founding his city, and installing

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4 Virgil, The Aeneid, trans. into English prose by W.F. Jackson Knight, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1958), p. 27. Subsequent citations are from this edition.

the gods of his race in the Latin land: and that was the origin of the Latin nation, the Lords of Alba, and the proud battlements of Rome" (p. 27). Aeneas's actions are important primarily because of their relevance to the future of a race, so that we do not have action which is significant in a kind of eternal present, but action which becomes significant by its relationship to the future and the past.

With Odysseus, the will for home is an intuitive urge, a fundamental part of his make-up. It is simply accepted and needs no explanations or reasons (though there are very good reasons known to the reader why he should get home, and quickly). He acts upon this urge, and the action itself incorporates its own sense of necessity. Aeneas's actions, on the other hand, have their prompting in an external rational desire, that of the founding of the Roman nation, and the significance of the action is similarly external. Reason, or rationality, controls the action and, to a certain extent, the reader's response. But reason does not produce the same kind of inevitability in the response as ritualized significance, nor does it work with the same kind of potency. The reader can choose not to be convinced of the importance associated with the action, and he can choose not to give the hero his whole-hearted support. Personally, I dislike Aeneas. This is partly the result of his denigration of Odysseus, to whom I have become attached, in his retelling of the siege of Troy, and although this is a personal and idiosyncratic reaction, it is, I think, indicative of the different kind of response

which is available to the reader.[5] When Aeneas deserts Dido, for example, the reader feels a mixture of sympathy and repulsion - and this is in marked contrast to the response to Odysseus's final rejection of Circe.

If we hesitate to class The Aeneid among our representative epics, we are left with the problem of what exactly we are to do with it. The distinction which I have been making between The Aeneid (and, I would also add, The Song of Roland and Paradise Lost[6]), on the one hand, and the Homeric epics, Gilgamesh and Beowulf, on the other, on the grounds of the former's differentiating concern with a serious purpose underlying and working upon the surface action, is, of course, hardly novel. More than thirty years ago, C. S. Lewis put his case in A Preface to *Paradise Lost* for the classification of epic as primary or secondary on the basis of "greatness of subject" as a motivating interest.[7] Lewis credited Virgil with the invention of an epic subject involving "national or almost cosmic issues",[8] these in The Aeneid being the founding of an empire and the reconciliation of personal desires with a sense of vocation. Our arguments begin to part company, however, when Lewis goes on to say that in the process

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5 I would prefer not to sympathize with Achilleus, but that is another matter.

6 In the representative samples I have tried to select, as far as possible, works from a spread of cultures. The examples are not meant to be all-inclusive in terms of the potential of the epic form.

7 C. S. Lewis, A Preface to *Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), pp. 12-50.

8 ibid., pp. 32 - 33.

of begetting the great subject, Virgil "altered the very meaning of the word epic" and then attributes to "romantic primitivism" that "silly habit . . . of making Homer a norm by which Virgil is to be measured".[9] If one cares to indulge in ideological invective, one can also argue that there is a spurious kind of teleological progressivism inherent in Lewis's appreciation of radical change as a qualitative development. Lewis's assertion that Virgil had changed the meaning of "epic" would also suggest grounds for a reconsideration of the very applicability of the term to The Aeneid, and to the secondary epic in general. The "silly habit" of insisting on the Homeric norm would seem to be justifiable from a generic, even if not a generally evaluative, point of view if, as I would argue, the supra-personal interest involved in the change of subject also results in a change of form.

The Aeneid and The Song of Roland share with primary epic[10] that characteristic concern with action which is intense and definitive. Yet there is a qualitative difference in the kind of intensity associated with the action of secondary epic, and in the process by which it becomes definitive. In secondary epic the value of the action and the ardour with which it is pursued are conditional upon an idea which is external in the sense that it is not implicit in the action itself. In The Aeneid and The Song of Roland (and in Paradise Lost, where action becomes intense and definitive in

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9 A Preface to *Paradise Lost*, p. 33

10 "Primary epic" and "secondary epic" are used here and subsequently for convenience. In view of the argument I develop later it would perhaps be more accurate to use the terms "epic" and "romance epic".

a quite different way as a result of the gradual redefinition of "heroic"), events acquire significance by the developing realization of their relationship to the great subject, whereas in the primary epic events are significant in an eternal present. The broad sweep of the Homeric line tends to mask the basically static nature of the presentation of action, but the constant recourse to the opening of sentences with initial conjunctions such as "so", "and", "but" and "then", conjunctions which imply continuity between episodes that are in fact far from contiguous, provides only a technical transition and does not affect constitutionally the equilibrium of the moment evident in a much more obvious form in the less refined style of Beowulf. In The Aeneid, Roland and Paradise Lost, however, there is a movement towards significance as the relevance of the action to an encompassing idea becomes apparent, so that the present moment loses that sense of being an end in itself. There are exceptions to this forward impulse of surface transitions in secondary epic - most notably in the episode dealing with Roland's death at Roncevaux in The Song of Roland, and in the early books of Paradise Lost, which deal with Satan's stand against God. In both of these cases it is a return to the primary epic's sense of action as a positive value, independent of all other considerations, which disrupts the flow of the narrative towards an end which needs neither Roland's death nor Satan's heroics.[11]

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[11] This is not to say that Roland's death and Satan's heroics are not functional in the effective realization of the great subject.

In primary epic it is the story, the pattern beneath the surface action, which provides the forward stimulus. Narrative movement here has its foundations in the impulse to resolve the experiential concomitants of the intense physical action. In secondary epic narrative continuity focuses on the plot, the linking of events to form meaningful relationships, and the concerns of story surface only occasionally to dictate the flow of action. On such occasions interest in the plot seems curiously threatened. When, for example, Aeneas falls in love with Dido, or Roland insists on an unaided rearguard defence, or Satan assumes the role of hero in his war with Heaven, the narrative seems to be answering to pressures inherent in the imaginative life of the immediate situation rather than to the process of the plot. In Paradise Lost the plot never seems fully to recover from this diversion of interest, and memories of Satan's former heroic self linger to cloud what might otherwise be clear-cut judgements at the end.[12] Virgil and the poet of The Song of Roland are much more successful in redirecting the course of the action and rectifying the imbalance, possibly because Roland's death and Aeneas's love for Dido are basically structural digressions, whereas Satan's actions (if not the heroic quality they assume) are themselves essential to the plot. However unsettling Aeneas's rejection of Dido's love may be at the time, the primary course of

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12 In terms of Stanley E. Fish's argument in Surprized by Sin: The Reader in *Paradise Lost*, I must be a fallen reader. His argument is, however, persuasive, and it seems to make Paradise Lost (its poetic qualities aside) a much more interesting narrative.

the action is promptly and forcefully reasserted. In The Song of Roland, Roland's death is used to restate the superiority of values which his death appears to negate. Roland is very much the primary epic hero, and the action following his death may be seen as a reinterpretation of primary epic in terms of secondary epic, with the focus of attention changing from an individual's supreme expression of selfhood unto death to the revenge of a nation for an act of treachery, the implications of which stretch far beyond the individual death which it precipitated.

For secondary epic to succeed on its own terms, the concerns of story need to be suppressed because they represent a kind of value which is different from, and liable to question, the absolute reality of the great subject. Much the same is true of plot in primary epic. The epic form does not allow story and plot to coexist in the ordering of its narrative. It is perhaps to this that epic owes the force of its impact upon the imagination. The sense of an absolute commitment to a single reality, expressed in unqualified physical response, permeates the whole epic experience. It is the same sense of absolutes which makes tragedy what it is, and the extreme difficulty which modern writers have found in writing both epic and tragedy makes one suspect that the whole generic issue is a period phenomenon. Sophistication seems to imply a developing awareness of a more diversified world where there is not one reality but several, and where the relationships between these realities are so complex as to make them virtually inseparable.

If we define the epic genre by the controlling presence of

a single absolute reality, irrespective of the form which that reality takes, then The Aeneid, The Song of Roland, and Paradise Lost would fall within this class. Difficulties arise, however, simply because it is so hard to sustain the absolute nature of a commitment to a rational reality. No matter how whole-hearted the commitment to the reality of a single idea may be, the presence of those more primitive, though not necessarily less valuable, interests, evident in obedience to the demands of an essential humanity in Aeneas's distraction by Dido, or in Roland's or Satan's honouring of their feelings of selfhood, tends to qualify the effect of a rational absolute. It is an awareness of this diminished intensity, rather than the vague yearnings of romantic primitivism, which explains the very real sense of loss that often accompanies a reading of secondary epic after some acquaintance with primary epic. We find ourselves then on a calmer, more conditional level of experience, without the fierce response to internal pressures which characterizes the world of primary epic.

It would seem fair to argue that while The Aeneid, The Song of Roland, and Paradise Lost are epic in intention, they tend towards romance in effect: they seek the absolute world of a single reality but they find themselves in a disparate world of two competing levels of experience. This second world is the romance world, but without romance's active interest in the independence of the two realities. Romance operates on two distinct, though related levels. It accepts the substantial reality of the normal, everyday world where men act reasonably and have rational goals, but it also cultivates the presence

of a mysterious world where irrational and intuitive values prevail. It is distinguished from secondary epic by its expansive consciousness of the value of equivocal experience, and from primary epic by the incursion of the problematic world on the intuitive.

We can see this dual commitment clearly illustrated in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. In Erec and Enide, for example, Erec fulfils his vocational and social function in much the same manner as Aeneas and Roland fulfil theirs. Erec goes off in pursuit of the proud, disdainful knight, or accepts the challenge to fight the knight of the Joy of the Court, not because of an inherent sense of altruism but because of that objective sense of duty which is part of his calling as a knight. In a similar manner, and for similar reasons, Chrétien's Perceval rescues the besieged Blancheflor, or seeks to regain his knightly honour after being denounced - to his understanding, unfairly - by the loathly damsel. But at the same time as the knightly hero is part of a world which requires rational responses to vocational and social responsibilities, he is also caught up in another world, whose workings cannot be understood by reason and which calls for intuitive or sympathetic reactions. While Erec is performing the work-a-day deeds of his profession, his exercise assumes another dimension as the White Stag Hunt and the Joy of the Court institute movements which do not depend upon Erec's awareness of his duty for their energy or their resolution. Erec recognizes the immediate ramifications of each adventure, but only dimly senses the motions of the other design of which he is a part. At the beginning of the second part of Erec and Enide, when Erec sets out to restore his

lost reputation, he exhibits the same sense of baffled commitment to something he does not really understand as Perceval expresses after his denunciation. They both act upon an impulse which is less foolhardy than intuitively attuned to a more urgent reality. The Grail Castle and the Joy of the Court may not be equatable in terms of their spiritual significance, but they are similar in their appreciation of other-worldly values and demands.

The medieval romance hero lives in two worlds, one of which can be understood in terms of probability and necessity, motivation and causation, and the other accessible only to an intuition whose logic need not have anything to do with these rational determinants. There is the reality of the ordinary, everyday world where knights will fight because their honour has been flouted, where kings will have a right to their queens, where youthly enthusiasm will cause mistakes which have to be righted. And then there is the reality of that different order of experience where moral justice can in fact be decided by physical combat, where the demands of love as an absolute value create their own nobility at the expense of mere kings and queens, and where the curbing of youthly enthusiasm will perversely result in only greater error. No direct relationship is sought between the two worlds, nor a comprehensive design to unify the action.

Romance operates in a realm in which irrationality can exist in the context of rationality, and rationality in the context of irrationality. This co-habitation of two different responses to the ordering of experience can create considerable problems for those unwilling to accept a notion of order which neglects the strictures

of conventional concepts of unity. The two most prominent structural features of romance - the lack of a sense of space and time, and the absence of a direct relationship between the nature of the action and some formal design, do not so much question these concepts as ignore them completely. Characters wander through a vague and indeterminate landscape that seems devoid of relative distance, and take part in consecutive adventures which are presented on a continuous, uniform time-scale.[13] And the adventures themselves do not function consistently in the revelation of an underlying scheme or idea. The critical reaction against romance in sixteenth-century Italy and eighteenth-century England centred on this failure to adhere to the Aristotelian precepts of unity, and, even today, the same criticisms are still made. W. W. Comfort, for example, in the introduction to his translation of Chrétien's Arthurian Romances, chastizes Chrétien unreservedly for his failure to provide a reasoned and coherent design:

> For our poet's lack of sense of proportion, and for his carelessness in the proper motivation of many episodes, no apology can be made. . . . a poet acquainted, as he was, with some first-class Latin poetry, and who had made a business of his art, ought to have handled his material more intelligently, even in the twelfth century. The emphasis is not always laid with discrimination, nor is his yarn always kept free of tangles in the spinning.[14]

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13 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight provides an exception to the general rule.

14 Introduction to Eric and Enid and Other Arthurian Romances, trans. W. W. Comfort (London: Dent, 1935), p. xi. Comfort anglicizes the 'Erec' and 'Enide' in the title of his translation of Chrétien's romances, but retains the French 'Erec et Enide' in the text. In keeping with common English practice, I have throughout referred to the work as Erec and Enide.

The general tenor of Comfort's introduction indicates that he is not altogether sympathetic towards his material, and his introduction has been deleted from the latest edition of his translation. But while his antipathy has perhaps been found embarrassing, the principles upon which it is based are still current. Critics seek coherence on one level only, and when they find much being made of an episode such as the Joy of the Court, which appears to have at the most only tangential relevance to the plot, they tend to see it as gratuitous and clumsy elaboration.

In some recent criticism, those who seek to maintain the literary status of romance seem compelled to suggest the presence of an implicit unifying design. Z. P. Zaddy, for example, maintains that the romance of Erec and Enide "is concerned with their joint apprenticeship to marriage and to the duties they assume on the death of King Lac".[15] With this idea as a starting point, Zaddy goes on to supply an explanation for the action, including that of the Joy of the Court, providing the "proper motivation" that Comfort had sought and failed to find. Some of Zaddy's suggestions do seem reasonable enough, but they involve, as we shall see later, a vapid descent into the prosaic. If this lesson in apprenticeship were all Erec and Enide has to offer as a narrative, it could deservedly be forgotten.

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15 Z. P. Zaddy, Chrétien Studies (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1973), p. 54.

Critics have also attempted to interpret the vagueness of time and space and the disjunction of action and design in the light of an implied meaning inherent in the type of experience portrayed. By inferring the religious nature of the experience from the romance writer's apparent unconcern with those prosaic elements of everyday life, time and space, or by inferring a primary concern with ideas above action and seeking a metaphorical or allegorical relationship between the action and the design, these critics are in fact conjecturing the presence of an intrinsic plot which encompasses the entire work. While it is true that some romances can be read as religious allegory, and that a few, such as the French prose romance, The Quest for the Holy Grail, are positively meant to be read as religious allegory, we should be wary of drawing such conclusions from the evidence of structural features alone. An absence of a sense of space and time is also a prominent characteristic of most folk-tales, fairy tales, and children's stories, yet we would hesitate to assume in all of these an aspiration towards the religious. The absence of temporal and spatial links may, on reflection, invite our thoughts to proceed to universals and spiritual abstractions, but in the process of reading the immediate function is to invite simple acceptance. The narrative floats in a kind of no-man's land, free from the demands of responsibility to anything other than the simple facts of the story. It takes the reader or listener even beyond the necessity for belief or otherwise.

The drawbacks associated with the approach to romance as allegory sublimated become more obvious if we look briefly at two

contentious issues - the function of the Joy of the Court and the Grail episodes in Chrétien's Erec and Enide and Perceval, or the Story of the Grail. Both episodes clearly represent some culminating experience and can be seen in some way as an aim or goal of the preceding action. But if we try to go further and ask ourselves what exactly these experiences mean, things start to get more complicated, and the tendency has been, particularly in the criticism of R. S. Loomis,[16] to see these complications as defects inherent in the work rather than in the approach taken towards it.

The Joy of the Court episode, for example, nicely balances that earlier incident which instigates the action of the second part of the narrative, when we learn that Erec is trapped in an uxorious indolence, the result of his total absorption in his love for Enide. Enide's awareness of the loss of reputation arising as a consequence of his withdrawal stirs her to an expression of grief, which Erec overhears. Erec's response is to renew in earnest his career as a knight. The high-point of his road to restored prowess is his defeat of Mabonagrain in the Joy of the Court, and it is this defeat which releases Mabonagrain from an entrapment similar in effect but different in kind to that which was Erec's.

It all makes for a nice design, but it is questionable whether the balancing of the episodes signifies anything other than a fondness

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16 R. S. Loomis, The Grail, from Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1963); Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1949).

for balance. If we try to discover how the details of this episode - the row of stakes, the horn, the magic garden, and the general faery undertones - contribute to an understanding of the nature of love, or of its obligations and responsibilities, we are left floundering in incoherent symbolism. Much the same is the case if we try to interpret the meaning of the Grail in Chrétien's Perceval. We know that the Grail exerts an important influence on Perceval's life and the development of his character, but we cannot safely say that it signifies anything other than something important. And surely knowing this much is enough. The Grail and the Joy of the Court episodes can be read satisfactorily, and perhaps even ideally, without the question of meaning arising at all. They are part of "the wonderful story",[17] and are made all the more poignantly compelling by their intrusion into a world which thinks it does not need them.

Narrative criticism has of late shown an increasing awareness of the novel's indebtedness to romance.[18] The attention is welcome, but it can also be misleading unless we are aware of the quite different experience that romance has to offer.

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17 The phrase comes from Iris Murdoch's The Unicorn, a novel which can be read as a failed romance - one which fails precisely because the characters are incapable of responding to the romance story in its own terms.

18 Two recent articles which explore the subject in some detail are: Henry Knight Miller, "Augustan Prose Fiction and the Romance Tradition", in Studies in the Eighteenth Century, III, eds. R. F. Brissenden & J. C. Eade (Canberra: Australian University Press, 1976), pp. 241-255, and Jerry C. Beasley, "Romance and the 'New' Novels of Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett", Studies in English Literature, 1500 - 1900, XVI (1976), 437-450.

By comparing in the next chapter the work of perhaps the greatest medieval romance writer, Chrétien de Troyes, with works which seem to belong to a stage of development that is closer to the novel, we can see both the techniques and achievements of romance, and the way in which the impulse to tell a fine story well grapples with the sometimes conflicting demands of a unifying, meaningful plot.

CHAPTER 4

Story and Plot in the Romances of Chrétien, Gottfried, and Wolfram

In the short preface to Erec and Enide Chrétien states the grounds on which he believes his superiority as an artist is based. He begins:

> Chrétien de Troyes maintains that one ought always to study and strive to speak well and teach the right; and he derives from a story of adventure a pleasing argument whereby it may be proved and known that he is not wise who does not make liberal use of his knowledge so long as God may give him grace. The story is about Erec the son of Lac--a story which those who earn a living by telling stories are accustomed to mutilate and spoil in the presence of kings and counts.[1]
>
> (Por ce dist Crestïens de Troies
> que reisons est que totevoies
> doit chascuns panser et antandre
> a bien dire et a bien aprandre;
> et tret d'un conte d'avanture
> une molt bele conjointure
> par qu'an puet prover et savoir
> que cil ne fet mie savoir
> qui s'escïence n'abandone
> tant con Dex la grasce l'an done:
> d'Erec, le fil Lac, est li conte,
> que devant rois et devant contes
> depecier et corronpre suelent
> cil qui de conter vivre vuelent.)[2]

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1 Chrétien de Troyes, Eric and Enid and Other Arthurian Romances, p. 1.

2 Chrétien de Troyes, Erec et Enide (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honore Champion, 1952), ll. 9 - 22. Elsewhere my argument does not hinge on verbal detail, and consequently the text has simply been rendered in translation.

In his translation of Erec and Enide, W. W. Comfort has rendered conjointure[3] as "argument", and this interpretation is in keeping with his general understanding of what the romance writer is attempting (and in this case, failing) to do. Comfort expects romance to provide a reasoned and coherent account of otherwise quite extraordinary adventures, and he feels justified in condemning those works which fail to live up to this expectation. His criticism of Chrétien, noted earlier, reflects both his expectation and his disappointment. He looks for a "pleasing argument" and finds instead a lack of proportion, poor motivation, and a tangled story-line.

The basis for translating conjointure as "argument" seems, however, to lie more in the scholarly disposition of the translator than in any objective analysis of the relationship of the word to associated grammatical forms. Chrétien's use of conjointure presumably bore some connection with the current verb, conjoindre, meaning "to link" or "to make a whole out of several parts".[4] This relationship is further supported if we accept Eugene Vinaver's other suggestion that conjointure was meant to be an approximation of Horace's use of junctura as "arrangement" or "composition" in De Arte Poetica, upon which Chrétien's preface is thought to be based. To equate "argument" with "arrangement" or "a whole made out of

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3 It is generally accepted that conjointure is Chrétien's own coinage.

4 Eugene Vinaver argues this convincingly in The Rise of Romance (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 36). My discussion of the use of conjointure is indebted to this work.

several parts" seems to betray a rather narrow, and specifically novelistic, appreciation of the possibilities of narrative technique available to literary artists. While it is possible to make a whole by relating the several parts to a developing meaning in order to establish an argument, there are other ways of arriving at a well-made narrative, even if one of the objectives of that narrative is "to teach the right". It is the nature of what is "right" which will determine the best method of teaching, and Chrétien's artistry lies in just this understanding.

Chrétien's technical skill, his conjointure, lay in his ability to join two separate, though structurally related, stories together under one plot. He has constructed a tale of consecutive adventures whereby Erec wins the love of Enide by his knightly prowess, and then almost loses his knightly prowess because of his love for Enide. Chrétien has at the same time woven into this plot the independent pattern of two stories which work to the same ends but by different means. Under Chrétien's control, the material which he suggested had been mutilated (or, as Vinaver points out, literally "broken into pieces"[5]) by professional story-tellers became an intricate whole made out of seemingly incompatible parts.

The romance of Erec and Enide is told in a relatively straightforward manner, but beneath the apparent artlessness of the telling is a carefully controlled structure. It is divided into

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5 The Rise of Romance, p. 37.

two sections,[6] the first combining the tales of a Stag Hunt and Erec's winning of Enide, and the second dealing with Erec's renewal of his reputation as a knight and the adventure of the Joy of the Court. The two sections, though not of equal length, are equally balanced by virtue of their contrasting forms. What the first section lacks in length is compensated for by the concentrated weight of its compact circular movement. And while the second section, coming as it does after this concentration of closely-knit action, might seem in danger of losing impact by its diversification, it creates in contrast a pattern of slowly developing intensification and significance. The result is a balance which reflects a desire for unity in the sense of Longinus's reconciliation of opposites rather than in Aristotelian tight internal relationships.

The first series of adventures begins with the Stag Hunt, from which arise two problems - one direct, the other indirect - both of which hinge on questions of honour. The disposal of the kiss, the responsibility incurred by the successful hunter, arises as a direct issue of the Stag Hunt, but its settlement is deferred, and ultimately resolved, by the consequences attendant upon the settlement of the second problem, the satisfaction of Erec's, and indirectly Guinevere's honour, which has been flouted while the hunt has been taking place. The two actions are intertwined in the

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6 There has been some dispute as to whether Erec and Enide should be read as having two, three, or four divisions. (For a brief summary of the various arguments see Z. P. Zaddy, "The Structure of Erec", in Chrétien Studies.) I would argue, for reasons which should become obvious as the discussion progresses, that there are in fact only two sections, as Chrétien himself states.

following manner. The Stag Hunt is proposed: the question of the kiss and the consequences of its disposal are raised and deferred; the Stag Hunt takes place: Erec's and Guinevere's honour is flouted but satisfaction is deferred; the question of the kiss is again raised when the outcome of the hunt is decided: it is deferred until the result of Erec's quest becomes known; Erec and Guinevere's honour is satisfied: the kiss is bestowed. There are quite plausible reasons why the action should take this particular course, winding back upon itself as it does, and, while there is some degree of circumstantiality involved (there is no logical reason, for example, why the disposal of the kiss should be deferred until Erec's return), there is enough of the matter-of-fact, cause-and-effect principle of procedure to create the appearance of credibility.

In contrast to this close-knit organization, the action of the second section is much more open-ended. Whereas in the first section the issues and necessary resolutions are clear-cut and apparent from the beginning, here both Enide and the reader are uncertain as to what Erec intends to do after he overhears Enide lament his loss of reputation. It is doubtful whether even Erec knows what he is doing when he first sets out. His immediate intention, as it happens, is simply to look for trouble, sending the beautifully dressed Enide out before him as an attractive bait. It soon becomes apparent that the principle governing the ordering of these adventures is the ever-increasing magnitude of the trouble Erec finds. Unlike the adventures in the earlier Celtic version of the tale, Erec's conquests

now rise in ascending order. He defeats three knights who have been attracted by Enide and gives their horses to her to lead in order to make his bait more enticing. He then defeats five knights (making his bait Enide and eight horses), then the count with an army of one hundred, then a king, Guivret, and then two giants. By this stage Erec's strength is so depleted that he finds himself in danger of being defeated, quite unintentionally, by his newly-made friend, Guivret. Enide's timely intervention saves him for his greatest and most marvellous adventure, the Joy of the Court.

The Joy of the Court episode has caused immense trouble for the conscientious Reasonable Critic. He asks, generally with considerable consternation, what all the faery extras associated with this adventure have got to do with an otherwise simple and straightforward chivalric episode. At least in terms of chivalric adventures, there is nothing unusual about a situation such as this in which a knight, to prove his devotion to a lady, binds himself by an extravagant promise. Nor is there anything particularly unusual about the exact details of this promise: the knight, Mabonagrain, has vowed to remain with the lady in the rarefied bliss of her garden until he has been defeated in single combat. The ladies of romance are forever seeking ways of keeping their men at home with them. Witness Belecane's restriction of Gahmuret's activities in Parzival. This lady is admittedly more cunning than most: the proviso that Mabonagrain must be defeated before he can leave stirs his manly honour and maintains his reputation (and her honour) in his cloistered life.

But Chrétien does not confine himself to the usual. The scene of the action is within a castle built on an island in the middle of a raging river. The garden in which Mabonagrain is cloistered is surrounded by an impregnable wall of air, and contains every pleasing bird, every medicinal plant, and all manner of fruit and flower, perpetually ripe and blossoming, and of a nature which prevents their being taken outside the garden. There is also a row of sharpened stakes, each impaling a man's helmeted head, except for the last one, which only carries a horn. King Evrain tells Erec that no one has been able to blow the horn, but whoever does succeed,

> his fame and honour will grow until it distance all those of his country, and he shall find such renown that all will come to do him honour, and will hold him to be the best of them all.[7]

This episode is obviously meant to be the ultimate test, and proof, of Erec's honour, and it is significant that on this occasion Enide holds her tongue. When they first set out on all these adventures, Erec had warned her that she must not try to alert him to danger, on pain of severe punishment. Enide's love for Erec made her disobey this warning each time they were attacked. This time she fears for Erec, but she does not know for what, so she can be of little help and he goes off to fight alone. Yet the fight, for all its faery surroundings and intensity, is still mundane. To a man who has successfully fought giants, a knight of only human strength, even though "wondrous tall", should hold no special terror. All the

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7 Eric and Enid and Other Arthurian Romances, p. 76.

mysterious surroundings do seem to be simply faery extras, since Erec's final battle is little different from those he has already endured. The blowing of the horn, upon which such significance has been placed, turns out to be something of an anti-climax. The spell surrounding the garden has already been broken with Mabonagrain's defeat, and the horn is little more than a signal for the populace at large to begin their celebrations.

We are bound to ask ourselves at this climactic point in the tale why Chrétien has gone to so much trouble to make an issue of the faery details of this particular episode. He would appear to have a definite purpose in mind, since in his version of the tale we find significant variations from the earlier Gereint, where the garden represented more of a game than an ordeal, where the lady held no special claim over the knight and where the horn itself raised the spell from the garden.[8] Also lacking is that almost hysterical response of joy which finalizes the episode. At the sound of the horn,

> Greatly did Enide rejoice . . . and Guivret was delighted too. The King is glad, and so are his people: there is not one who is not well suited and pleased at this. No one ceases or leaves off from making merry and from song. Erec could boast that day, for never was such rejoicing made. . . . And those who were in the garden hastened to remove Erec's arms, and in emulation they all sang a song about the Joy. . . . Erec was well sated with joy and well served to his heart's desire.[9]

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8 The assumption that the variations belong to Chrétien rather than to a hypothetical common source may be wrong. However, the evidence of Chrétien's conscious artistry, contained in the short preface to Erec and Enide, would suggest that even if the common source were more sophisticated than its adaptations, Chrétien has accepted the significance of the original details.

9 Eric and Enid . . ., p. 80.

Z. P. Zaddy's suggestion that Chrétien has Erec's adventures culminate in the Joy of the Court so that we can "see the relationship that has developed between Erec and Enide as infinitely superior to the one existing between Mabonagrain and his amie"[10] is not only an unwelcome descent into the mundane, but also ignores the emphasis on the mysterious overtones. R. S. Loomis acknowledges the presence of the faery details, but maintains that the apparently inordinate emphasis on them can be explained by the hypothetical existence of a fully developed coherent narrative, based on Celtic tradition, which has filtered down to Chrétien in a somewhat battered and degenerate state, and from whose sometimes irrelevant concerns Chrétien was unable to free himself.[11] It is true that many of the details of the Joy of the Court can be found in Celtic tradition, but while these sources may explain the origin of the ideas, they do not explain the emphasis that is placed on them.

The same kind of problem arises in the earlier episode of the White Stag Hunt. The Stag Hunt appears to be only the superficial structure beneath the design of the first section, yet Chrétien ends this section with the comment:

> By this adventure the King carried out the practice and the usage to which the White Stag was entitled at his court.
> Here ends the first part of my story.[12]

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10 Chretien Studies, pp. 46 - 47. Zaddy's other suggestion that Enide's role in the romance is a training in self-assurance is no more up-lifting.

11 R. S. Loomis, Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes, pp. 168 - 184.

12 Eric and Enid . . ., p. 24.

For the greater part of the tale we have not been intensely interested in the outcome of the Stag Hunt. Our attention has been focused more on the indirect problem which the hunt has raised, that of the flouting of Erec's honour and the quest for satisfaction. Chrétien has taken some care to make the Stag Hunt reflect the issue of honour present in the more prominent concerns of Erec's quest, as he has also done with the Joy of the Court, by making Mabonagrain's relationship with his lady dishonourable in a related, though fundamentally different, sense to Erec's earlier relationship with Enide. When the Stag Hunt is first proposed, Arthur is warned by Gawain of the strife which would ensue. Whoever kills the White Stag earns the right to kiss the fairest maiden in the court, and whichever of the five hundred available maidens is chosen, the champion of each of the other four hundred and ninety-nine will feel bound to prove in contest that his maiden is fairer and therefore the rightful choice. Arthur nevertheless insists on the hunt taking place, "for a king's word ought never to be gainsaid".[13] Although the same difficulties are pointed out to Arthur in the earlier Gereint, they come much later in the tale, after the hunt has taken place, and are averted without reference to the contradiction of a king's will. But despite what appears to be a deliberate attempt to relate the adventures thematically, we are left with a situation where the main significance of the hunt is circumstantial, and we may

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[13] Eric and Enid . . ., p. 2.

feel inclined to question the judiciousness of Chrétien's emphasis here as well, particularly when the second section is entirely devoted to a further exploration of Erec's sense of honour.

Comfort suggests that it is instances such as this that reveal Chrétien's lack of a sense of proportion, a failure which is incompatible with his avowed sense of artistry. But Chrétien has not thrown the emphasis of the first section onto the practice of the White Stag Hunt because he misjudges the weight of interest which Erec's quest carries. The Stag Hunt represents a source of order in the narrative which is independent of the rational causes and consequences exemplified by Erec's adventures, which is present in a similar form in the second part of the tale, and which makes itself apparent only on its completion. It is an order which does not rely upon, or even need, the machinations of the reasonable world. While on one level Erec undergoes a series of adventures which just happen to fall into place and provide a satisfactory resolution to a time-honoured custom, there is another level on which the ritual of the White Stag Hunt generates the energies for its own solution and itself produces the maiden upon whom to bestow the kiss. And again, while Erec undergoes a graduated series of adventures which culminates in the restoration of his honour in an ordeal which can only be endured by the bravest and most notable of knights, there is another level on which mysterious entrapment secures its own means of release, where the Joy of the Court institutes the momentum for its own resolution.

When Guinevere asks Arthur to wait for Erec's return before settling the issue of the kiss, there is no indication that she has some kind of presentiment of the outcome of Erec's quest, nor is there any indication, when Arthur accepts the suggestion, that he is merely putting off an unpleasant task as long as possible. Instead there is a peculiar kind of quiet confidence, devoid of any specific expectation, in their willingness to allow events to take their own course. We find Erec in a similar state of mind when he sets out at the beginning of the second series of adventures. He seems to know what needs to be done in the immediate context, even to the extent of specifying Enide's dress and his own. Yet he does not seem to know why he is doing it, nor where his actions will eventually lead. Erec, like Guinevere and Arthur, appears simply to make himself available to the workings of something beyond his control and beyond his comprehension. And although he leaves, committing himself to chance, it is something other than chance which finally brings him to the Joy of the Court, as it was something other than chance which was seen at work when he had earlier arrived at Arthur's court with Enide.

Enide's arrival at the court was greeted neither as a miracle nor as a glorious accident, but as a necessary ingredient of a harmonious resolution. She took her place as part of a prescribed pattern, and the delight which followed was in response to its successful completion. Erec's arrival at the Joy of the Court follows a similar pattern. Although we do not know where Erec is headed throughout the second part of the tale, we are immediately aware after he enters this adventure that it has been waiting for him for

some time. Erec is told by King Evrain that

> this single stake which stands apart, where you
> see this horn hung up, has been waiting
> a very long time, but we know not for whom,
> whether for you or someone else.[14]

The stake and the horn have been waiting for Erec, not because this episode is required to put the final seal upon Erec's restored honour (although it does), but because Erec, like the knight confined to the garden, has himself been entrapped by love. Since Erec is already on his way back to Arthur's court when he happens upon this adventure, we can assume that Erec is quite satisfied with the state of his honour. The Joy of the Court is the fulfilment of another movement based on another source of order, and caters for interests which seek satisfaction beyond rational resolutions.

That a man trapped by love should need to be released by another man who was also trapped by love, is not the kind of logic which wins a reasonable argument, and there does not seem to be anything to be gained from trying to draw conclusions from it about the general nature of love or honour, or of their relationship. Like poetic justice or the simple beauty of proverbs and superstititions, it does little in the way of solving practical problems, but it is emotionally satisfying. It is a kind of logic which is capable of moving the reader to a delight in a kind of magic, and like magic it gains its effect both by being mysterious and by producing results. By presenting

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[14] Eric and Enid . . ., p. 75.

the wondrous in the context of a rational design, the narrative not only involves the reader in something he does not understand, but also confronts him with the realization that the things he does not understand are working to the same effect as those he does. The special impact of the Joy of the Court and the Stag Hunt depends upon their ability to produce by extraordinary means the same outcome as that achieved by ordinary means. It is not simply that we are involved with a mystery, but with a mystery that works.

It is important to make this distinction between mere mystery and mystery that works, because in it lies the difference between romance and fantasy.[15] In fantasy we expect not reasonable experiences but marvellous ones, and when the giants snatch the lady away from her nuptial rights and lodge her in an imaginary castle, we accept it in the spirit in which it is offered: that of sheer amazingness. The problem of not understanding simply does not arise. But when the romance writer combines the marvellous with otherwise quite reasonable adventures, then not understanding becomes an issue that influences our entire response to the action as a whole. Erec's adventures acquire a curious quality of dignity from being associated with a pattern that is larger than himself, and there is something extremely moving in the joy which descends upon everyone when the greater movement is completed.

Chrétien sought on the one hand to enlighten, and on the other to move and impress, and he did not feel compelled to achieve one effect by the same means as the other. R. S. Loomis has commented

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[15] Here and elsewhere I am using "fantasy" in a non-generic sense.

that if Chrétien was really the intelligent creative genius that many saw him to be, he could not have been content with poor motivation, a rambling plot and incoherent symbolism.[16] But for Chrétien, the existence of a rational order did not deny the validity of what was not rationally accessible and could not be so ordered. He sought an appreciation of a sense of mystery, of not being able to understand, and the beauty of his tale lies in the delicate shade of the incomprehensible which envelops it.

This same shade lies at the centre of the finest romance tales. The Grail, or the magic potion of the Tristan stories exerts a similar enigmatic influence upon the narrative structure, and the best romance writers were those who could respond to the mystery as mystery, without seeking to explain it in terms of the realistic texture of the prosaic world. In Tristan, Gottfried von Strassburg comments upon those writers who maltreat this shade (he is referring specifically to Wolfram von Eschenbach), converting the shade which delights the heart into the shade which only troubles the mind:

> Inventors of wild tales, hired hunters after stories, who cheat with chains and dupe dull minds, who turn rubbish into gold for children and from magic boxes pour pearls of dust!--these give us shade with a bare staff, not with the green leaves and twigs and boughs of May. Their shade never soothes a stranger's eyes. To speak the truth, no pleasurable emotion comes from it, there is nothing in it to delight the heart.[17]

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16 Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes, p. 466.

17 Gottfried von Strassburg, Tristan, trans. A. T. Hatto, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967), p. 105.

Although Gottfried's attack is directed more at the lack of poetic grace in Wolfram's style, the complexity of expression is in itself a reflection of a general change in attitude towards the material Wolfram uses. Gottfried seems to have understood, as Wolfram had not, where the peculiar attraction of romance lies, and while his acceptance of the demands of his form is not as enthusiastic as Chrétien's, he tackles his material with a sense of duty which only marginally detracts from the fascination of the tale.

In Gottfried's treatment of the legend, the love-potion retains the quality of non-abatement it has in his source, Thomas's Tristran. Once the potion has been drunk by Tristan and Isolde, they fall into a deep and eternal love which is capable of change only in its outward manifestation. The immediate effect of the potion is tumultuous: Tristan is thrown into a violent confrontation between Love and Honour, and Isolde into a somewhat less violent struggle between Love and Maidenly Modesty. There is no attempt to offer even a cursory transitional period during which it could be suggested that Isolde's unqualified hatred and Tristan's business-like neutrality could modulate into a developing love. The passion strikes and the pair succumb to a love which becomes a value independent of all other considerations. It offers neither an alternative personal morality nor an alternative to social values. Nor does it attempt to deny the relevance of these pressures. It is a love whose demands are such that they cannot even be questioned by the presence of very real duties elsewhere.

It is to the instantaneous and absolute nature of the love bond that the legend owes its elemental compulsion, and it is to Gottfried's credit that he insists on these qualities, despite the difficulties which they create when combined with his devotion to a consistent characterization and plot. Beroul's version of the tale allows the potion to wear off after three years, enabling him to bring the lovers back from their unproductive isolation in the forest to engage once again in the conflict upon which the narrative movement depends.[18] Gottfried's love-potion exerts its influence unabated throughout the lovers' lives, and it is an awareness of the physical poverty of their existence in the forest, combined with a resurgence of Tristan's sense of loyalty to his king, which brings the pair back. While the question of Tristan's perplexed loyalties makes itself felt from the very onset of the potion's effect, it is not entirely satisfactory that it should assert itself at this particular point, however aggravating the associated material discomforts might be.

Nor is it any easier to accept the reasons offered for Tristan's marriage to Isolde of the White Hands. He leaves Isolde the Fair and engages in martial exploits, hoping that, by committing himself physically to violent action, the agony of his torment will become supportable. The friendship with Kaedin which he forms during these engagements leads him to the presence of Kaedin's sister, whose beauty, and name, which she shares with Isolde the Fair, brought him both joy

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18 "Beroul" is used for convenience. There is some doubt as to whether there was more than one writer.

and sorrow. He seeks to convert these mixed feelings into love, for the same reason that he entered the fighting - "in the speculation that, through her, the load of his longing might dwindle".[19] His plan does not work, and we are left with an uneasy feeling that he should never have thought it would. If we are going to enter into the realms of logical motivations, it is much easier to accept Beroul's concept of a secondary love which remains after the love-potion has worn off, a kind of love which does not carry the overwhelming bond of magic which would seem to deny the possibility of compensatory attachments.

The return of Tristan and Isolde from the forest isolation only presents difficulties if we feel compelled to provide rational explanations for the entire action. If we surrender to the demands of the story, the return from the forest becomes inevitable. Isolation diminishes the value of the love because only when that love takes its place beside social and moral values can we feel its extraordinary power. It needs to be balanced against all that is good and noble in the ordinary world to show the full strength of its compulsion, to create that tight-rope harmony in the midst of bewildering conflict. Tristan's attempts to find some kind of consolation in Isolde of the White Hands fulfil a similar function. The love is proved greater than the need for peace of mind or even sanity. And it is proved greater even than the people who find themselves victims of it. This alone makes the attempt to provide a reasonable sub-structure

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19 Tristan, p. 291.

a supererogatory task, because the motives or intentions of the people involved are ultimately irrelevant.

Gottfried does not have Chrétien's ability to divide his loyalties even-handedly. He remains faithful to the demands of the traditional story but is continually drawn to a revelation of the intricate mechanisms of human relationships which define the realities of his own philosophy of self-annihilating love. While Gottfried always maintains the fundamental significance of the potion as an expression of an incomprehensible power, he seems also to want to evoke its symbolic potential as an expression of a particular kind of love which exists in a material form, and which is open to intellectual exploration. Gottfried describes Tristan's love for Isolde as that love "he was born to",[20] and the first quarter of the narrative is devoted to a detailed review of this inheritance. The extremity of his parents' passion is meant to validate in worldly terms Tristan's ability to fall so completely in love that he is capable of denying his true nature - his sense of loyalty and honour. Yet the presence of the potion should negate the necessity for this kind of explanation. While reasoning such as this may help to satisfy any misgivings Gottfried might have had about the credibility of the tale, it also brings the tale into that symbolic dimension which is inimical to its very nature.

A good romance writer is able to offer us the best of both worlds. Romance requires on the writer's part an imagination which is

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20 Tristan, p. 293.

susceptible to the beauty of felt harmonies and balances as well as to those which originate in known relationships. Gottfried acknowledges the claim of the former, but is more at home with the latter, and as a consequence he finds it necessary to support the love-potion's effects with a rational "back-stop". This need not as a matter of course diminish the totality of the potion's nature, but it does threaten it by conferring upon it something of the quality of a symbol - a powerful symbol, perhaps, but nevertheless one which implies a reference to a concept larger than the thing itself.

We may doubt Gottfried's enthusiasm for the claims of the non-rational world, but we can have no doubts as to where Wolfram von Eschenbach's sympathies lie in Parzival. For the modern critic, Wolfram's major achievement is in his ability to bring an intellectually satisfying sense of unity to the diverse elements of his traditional material.[21] Chrétien's Perceval (which is Wolfram's most likely major source, despite his assertions otherwise) moves between two quite separate worlds, the world of chivalry and the world

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21 Margaret F. Richey, for example, argues that the significant difference between Wolfram's Parzival and Chrétien's Perceval is that "Wolfram's account is a unity". She observes that

> With Chrestien, the story moves between two disparate worlds, outwardly united by the polish and grace of his easy-flowing style, but inwardly of a different order, one crass and fantastical, the other courtly. Wolfram's world is always that of chivalric life, into whose atmosphere those fantastical elements . . . are absorbed. Chrestien creates an illusory sense of unison by sheer magic of style, while Wolfram creates a real and organic unison by breathing a stronger humanity into the characters, and especially by giving full significance to the destiny of the hero, which becomes the controlling theme. (Studies of Wolfram von Eschenbach; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957, p. 53.)

of the marvellous. Wolfram makes them one by a process of elaborate rationalization which absorbs the marvellous into the chivalric framework.

The steadfastly prosaic orientation of Wolfram's narrative is evident from the very beginning. He starts, in a similar manner to Gottfried, by firmly grounding his tale in the world of knighthood. The lengthy account of Gahmuret's life serves three purposes: it evokes the spirit of knightly endeavours; it "explains" Parzival's characteristic simple-minded recklessness by making it a part of his ancestral heritage; and it justifies in advance Parzival's childhood isolation. Chrétien, on the other hand, begins by making evident the duality of his concerns. He offers only a brief account of Perceval's father (and of his two brothers, whom Wolfram does not mention), but it is an account which strangely mirrors what we are later to learn of the Fisher King. In the process he endows even the straightforward world of childhood with the hint of far-reaching mystery. Like the Fisher King, Perceval's father was "wounded through the thighs so that he was maimed in body. The great lands and great treasures which he had won by valour, all were lost and he fell into poverty".[22] After the death of King Uther Pendragon the whole

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22 Chrétien de Troyes, Perceval, or the Story of the Grail, trans. R. S. Loomis, in Medieval Romances, eds. R. S. Loomis and H. L. Loomis (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 15. Loomis does not translate all of the extant Perceval, leaving out the Gawain adventures, which he does not consider a necessary part of the tale. We may question his appreciation of the romance form, but not the fluency of his translation. The only complete translation of Perceval is by Robert White Linker (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1952) and it is cold and technically precise.

land fell to waste and disorder, and Perceval's father, along with his family, sought refuge in the wild forest. The Fisher King had suffered a similar wound, after which his land fell into ruin, and the social order disintegrated. He now lies in seclusion in a castle in the wilderness. It is difficult to determine the exact nature of the relationship between Perceval's father and the Fisher King, and it is not helped by the fact that Chrétien's tale is unfinished. But I think a sense of some relationship is important, and it is indicative of Chrétien's sensibility that he is able to let suggestions ride and work upon the imagination without finding it necessary to expand them by explanation.

It is also probably indicative of Wolfram's sensibility that he neatly divides Parzival's inheritance between his father and mother, and conscientiously traces the two strands of his character through the subsequent action. By linking his mother with Parzival's higher spiritual destiny, Wolfram makes it more fitting that Parzival's failure to ask the question at Grail Castle should be related to his failure to respond to his mother's grief at his departure. This failure to be sensible of other people's distress becomes Parzival's ultimate sin. In Chrétien, the reason for Perceval's dismal performance at the Grail Castle seems arbitrarily dependent upon his not stopping to see that his mother was safe after he had seen her fall into a swoon. The maiden whom he meets on leaving the Grail Castle tells him:

> This has happened to you . . . because of your sin against your mother; she has died of grief for you.[23]

This is the moral basis of Perceval's failure, and it is hard to see its connection with the practical reason which Perceval himself offers for his silence:

> he refrained from asking . . . for he was mindful of the lesson which Gornemant gave him, warning him against too much speech, and he feared that if he asked, it would be considered rude.[24]

Wolfram's Parzival offers a similar excuse:

> Gurnemanz counseled me in all sincerity not to ask many questions. . . . What if my stay here proves to be like my stay with him? Then without any questions I shall hear how this knightly company fares.[25]

But Wolfram's narrative is so constructed that this practical reason becomes one more instance - a kind of ritual instance - of that fundamental fault of character which is evident in all Parzival's sinful actions. The basic moral issue is absorbed into the ritual experience and, in the process, the question to be asked of the Grail Society changes.

Chrétien's Perceval is condemned for failing to ask why the lance bled and whom one served with the Grail, and his failure is explained by two unrelated reasons, one practical and natural, and the other irrational and arbitrary. His tongue is stopped by his own concern for propriety, and by the mysterious workings of moral justice.

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23 Perceval, p. 64.

24 ibid., p. 58.

24 Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival, trans. Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 130.

In Wolfram's version, the concern for propriety is made to reflect the moral failing by altering the kind of question which should be asked from one which is concerned with the spiritual nature of the Grail Society to one which is concerned with the sorrow evident in that society. The question becomes, as we learn in Book IX, "Sir, what is it that troubles you?" By failing to respond to that sorrow, Parzival is repeating the sin which allowed him on former occasions to ignore his mother's grief at his departure, to ignore Jeschute's distress, and to show callous disrespect to a vanquished knight, when he stripped Ither of his armour.

From one point of view, the changes made in Parzival are wholly admirable. By moving the emphasis from the nature of the Grail to the nature of Parzival's special sinfulness, Wolfram has found an ideal instrument of unification, for not only does it concentrate all Parzival's failings around one idea, but it also offers a means of drawing a specific relationship between the Grail and Arthurian societies. Parzival has learned knighthood's rules of conduct, but he does not understand the spirit behind them. The ethical basis of knighthood is the concern for others before oneself, so by making the question which gains Parzival entry into the Grail Society one which reflects that concern, Wolfram seems to be suggesting the possibility of a relationship between the two societies in terms of spirit and substance. This is further supported by the realization that Parzival is taken back to the Grail Castle only after he has ceased actively seeking it, because it is only then that he has stopped thinking about himself and the injustice which he believes has been done to him.

This is the kind of rational ordering that many critics would like to see in Chrétien. It is an intelligent and adept piece of rationalization which unifies the narrative by the process of explanation in terms of a single concept, that of the nature of Parzival's special sinfulness. It does, however, have its problems because although Wolfram has successfully managed to change the emphasis, he cannot avoid entirely the residue of mysterious significance which is left with the Grail once this change has been accomplished. Wolfram does his best to incorporate these elements in the general realistic sub-structure, and it is hard not to admire his attempt. The lance that bled so mysteriously in Chrétien is explained away by Wolfram as a medical instrument: the lance is placed on Anfortas's wound at time of particular pain in the hope that one pain will alleviate the other. The knives in the procession are used to cut from the head of the lance the ice which forms from the chill that attacks Anfortas's body when certain stars appear. (There are no knives in Chrétien's version. Their appearance in Wolfram is generally regarded as a result of his mistranslation of tailleur.) The Grail itself is changed from a chalice containing a single, life-sustaining wafer to a kind of stone which produces, in the flesh, all manner of wine and food, and upon which appear messages from God.[26] And finally, in one ingenious stroke, Wolfram removes the last trace of mysterious glamour from the legendary

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26 In The Krater and the Grail (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), Henry and Renée Kahane suggest an hermetic source for Wolfram's representation of the Grail as a stone.

Fisher King by revealing that Anfortas does not, in fact, fish: he is simply rowed on the lake so that he may breathe the sweet breezes instead of the unbearable odour of his festering wound.

Wolfram has successfully unified what were in Chrétien two separate types of experience, but he has done so at some cost. One cannot help asking why Parzival should be the chosen one, especially when Gawain's adventures provide ample evidence of his possessing that over-riding concern for others which Parzival lacks until the very end. Chrétien's Perceval, on the other hand, is not affected in this manner, because the questions which are required of him involve an appreciation of the Grail Society as something quite different from the Arthurian society, so that it is much easier to accept that Perceval's election to the Grail is based on qualities that are independent of his chivalric nature.

It is only at the very end of Wolfram's Parzival, however, that the real price of Wolfram's rationalization becomes apparent. There is no sense of climax when Parzival is taken to the Grail Castle at last to ask the question. Wolfram makes his effect chiefly by weight of numbers: at the finale we have assembled King Arthur's court, Orgeluse's court, Feirefiz's massive army, oddments belonging to countless courts released from the Castle of Wonders, and finally the entire Grail Society - "untold throngs", to quote Wolfram. But weight of numbers cannot be completely successful in hiding the feeling of anti-climax at the very end. There is a very real sense of emptiness here, and it has its source in the essential emptiness of the representation of the Grail itself. The Grail has become little

more than a shining accessory to chivalric life. Its mystery has been lost in explanatory detail and its significance seems to lie more in the issues it raises than in its quality as a wondrous object.

The desire to rationalize the mysterious and to unite divergent experiences under an order based on the discovery of their relationships may in most cases be a laudable narrative impulse, but it does not make for good romance. Good romance writers, like Chrétien, are "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".[27] Chrétien, unlike Wolfram (and unlike Coleridge), would not "let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge".[28] The relationship between medieval romance and the romantic revival and modern romance lies in just this capability; the distinction between them lies in the failure of most post-medieval romance writers to realize just how fine that isolated verisimilitude must be.

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27 The Letters of John Keats, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), I, p. 193.

28 ibid., pp. 193 - 4.

CHAPTER 5

From Romance to Novel

Gillian Beer's introduction to the romance in the series, The Critical Idiom, begins with the apologetic announcement:

> Any history of the romance will in one sense be a record of decadence.[1]

In its context, this comment comes as a prelude to an exercise in the politic. In the very first paragraph Beer forestalls critical misgivings about romance by disposing of the nuisance of romance's popular sub-literary offspring. As the parent of titillating tales and wish-fulfilling day-dreams, romance would seem to have a lot to live down. The comment is, however, of more widespread relevance because, even in the hands of writers with some claim to serious artistic purpose, romance has suffered an unhappy fate. We may regret the disposition to rationalize romance evident in Wolfram and, to a lesser extent, in Gottfried, but equally regrettable is the more pervasive tendency to lose sight of the reasonable world in an enthusiastic embracing of the fanciful. Typical of romance written after the thirteenth century are the formless proliferations of the adventures of minor knights in the prose versions of the Arthurian saga, the indeterminate whimsy of

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1 Gillian Beer, The Romance, The Critical Idiom (London: Methuen, 1970), p.1.

the pastoral fantasy of Lyly, Greene, and Lodge, and the high-flown tedium of heroic romance. Romance seems to present an opportunity to indulge a voluminous and unbounded fancy, and many writers seized it enthusiastically. The result, in most cases, was less than riveting narrative.

To write romance well requires not only a good command of basic narrative skills - an acquirement sadly lacking in most of the perpetrators of seventeenth-century heroic romance - but also a particular sensibility, one which is finely responsive to the attractions of both the rational and irrational worlds. Romance does contain elements of fantasy, but what many writers failed to realize is that it is distinguished from pure fantasy by its association with a reasonable world and its acceptance of irrational solutions and "explanations" without having to deny the validity of rationally comprehensible experience. It is not enough for the romance writer to escape into a world where anything might happen because anything is possible, thus avoiding the necessity to burden himself with the mechanics of credibility; the good romance writer needs to be able to relate the mysterious and the marvellous to the ordinary world in which he and his reader generally feel more safely at home, in order to make the attraction to the other world a significant human response. Neither is it enough for the romance writer to leap from real to faery with indiscriminate abandon; he must make the reader feel the need for both and continually remind him of the tug, to and from.

The demands of the medium are such that, unless the division of loyalty between the rational and irrational worlds can be expressed with extraordinary vividness in a situation in which the division is constantly regenerated by the irresolvability of the dual commitment (such as we find in the triangles formed by Lancelot's conflicting devotion to both Arthur and Guinevere, or Tristan's devotion to both Mark and Isolde, or Perceval's devotion to both Arthurian society and the Grail Society), the interpenetration of the two worlds can be sustained for only relatively short periods of time. Even then, the writer must be able to capture his composite vision in an image of singular intensity. The most successful of the romances not focused specifically on the details of the legends of Arthur or seeking promising conflicts of values in the mythic significance of what is loosely termed the matter of France and the matter of Rome are those which confine themselves to quite brief but concentrated evocations of the romance experience. The explosion of the Green Knight upon Gawain's conscience, for example, and the sudden disturbance wrought by the fairy prince in Orfeo's comfortable life, both have a quality of arresting vigour which is capable of sustaining the clash of differing worlds in the reader's imagination. Even the mundane conflict within the more conventional love triangle in Marie de France's Eliduc abruptly recovers the true spirit of romance by the single, compelling incident of the weasel and the red flower. Represented as they are against the background of Guildeluec's bewildered discovery of Eliduc's new love laid out in the chapel apparently dead, the image of intense, selfless love

captured in the weasel's distress at finding its mate killed and its devotion in seeking out the brilliant, life-restoring flower lifts the narrative above the purely realistic to a level of experience where Guildeluec's relinquishing of Eliduc becomes not only credible but a genuine resolution. Romance needs this "fine isolated Verisimilitude" to validate what would otherwise seem quaint and even a little inane.

The example of Eliduc raises an interesting consideration regarding the structure of romance, because it has, in a sense, two endings, one proceeding from story and the other from plot. The story is validated by Guildeluec's generous abdication from her legal rights as Eliduc's Wife in acknowledgement of the intensity of Eliduc's love for Guilliadun, but the narrative continues until social and moral demands can be satisfied by the eventual decision of all three to retire to a religious life. In a note prefaced to his translation of Eliduc, John Fowles claims that the latter resolution simply obeys the contemporary requirement of setting the tale in a Christian context.[2] While a certain gratuitousness in the final monastic seclusion must be acknowledged, to deny the need it fulfils in providing the plot with an acceptable solution in terms of social morality is to ignore the evidence of similar endings in other romances where the Christian context is absent. In Erec and Enide,

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2 John Fowles, "A Personal Note" on Eliduc, in The Ebony Tower (1974; rpt. St Albans, Herts: Panther Books, 1975), pp. 123 - 4.

for example, the demands of the story are satisfied in the Joy of the Court, yet the narrative does not end until the plot finds its resolution in the crowning of King Erec and Queen Enide.

The resolution of the plot in both Erec and Enide and Eliduc has a perfunctory air about it, more marked in Eliduc, where the sobriety of tone accompanying the monastic seclusion does not support the successful resolution of the story in the same degree as the celebration of the coronation reinforces the outburst of the Joy in Erec and Enide. Most of the romances studies in this thesis have, in varying degrees, this deflating effect at the end; yet if the independence of story and plot is to be maintained, there seems to be no escape from this sense of anti-climax. If the irrational world is set within the context of the rational, then plot must be resolved after the torments of love and spirit have been assuaged, with an inevitable decline in intensity. But if the rational world is contained within the irrational, as might be said to happen in Gottfried's Tristan, the narrative is in danger of lapsing into a bathetic curve, with the whole section between the beginning and end appearing tedious and irrelevant in comparison to the strength of passion exhibited in the growth of love and its persistence unto death.

In the Morte d'Arthur, Malory does succeed in avoiding this slackening at the end, but he does so only by allowing the plot to dominate the structure of the narrative. Plot, as Elizabeth Bowen

noted in her definition, seeks an end,[3] and it is this persistent sense of destination which envelops Malory's work.[4] The Morte d'Arthur is a major literary achievement, but it does suffer as romance from its preoccupation with the destiny of Arthur. In his endeavour to unravel completely the tangled threads of the Lancelot/Guinevere/Arthur complex in order to enforce a cumulatively inexorable approach to Arthur's death, Malory destroys the internal horizontal movement which sought, even if eventually unsuccessfully, an equilibrium between Lancelot's devotion to both Arthur and Guinevere. Combined, moreover, with this awareness of end is a cluttered circumstantiality, the product of a desire to include all that was important in the Arthurian cycle, and that endeavour vitiates the possibility of sensitive attunement to the subtleties of response which characterizes romance.

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3 Quoted in Chapter 2, p.32. In The Sense of an Ending, Frank Kermode also explores this characteristic of plot, but his work does not distinguish between story and plot. He maintains, for example, that the peripeteia of a story satisfies "our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route. It has nothing whatever to do with any reluctance on our part to get there at all" (London: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 18). Peripeteia may well function in this way in a plot, but in a story it may also cater for a very real reluctance to get to the end. Story, related as it is to appetites for which sweetness is in anticipation more than in fulfilment, delights in the delay of the promised land.

4 This is also apparent in Wolfram's Parzival where, as Margaret Richie noted, the destiny of the hero is all-pervading.

I do not want to seem overly harsh in my opinion of Malory: what he has done, he has done well. But what he has lost by directing his narrative energy to a design which seeks fulfilment in the relentless pursuit of an end becomes apparent on an examination of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, a work which aims at the same kind of epic magnitude, and which manages to maintain that internal equipoise necessary to the evocation of the romance experience without forfeiting all sense of end-directed narrative. Ariosto's work is also interesting from another point of view: it reveals the potential, later to be realized in the work of novelists as diverse as Sterne, Conrad, and Faulkner, of the story-telling process itself as a source both of pleasure and narrative significance.

Orlando Furioso features a highly refined development of the kind of narrative interlacing which was the primary structural principle of both Chrétien's Perceval and Wolfram's Parzival, and which Malory did his best to eliminate.[5] There are two basic methods of controlling the interlacing. The narrative can revolve around one character who journeys through the country, leaving a trail of unfinished business that he proceeds to tie up, preferably in some

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[5] Malory succeeded in removing the last traces of narrative interlacing in all of the tales of the Morte D'Arthur but "The Tale of the Sankgreal". The search for the Grail is an almost abstract version of the romance experience, and it is perhaps indicative of Malory's true genius that he realized the impossibility of rendering that experience in his preferred unilinear manner.

kind of climactic pattern, towards the end. This principle is at work behind the Jeschute and Grail Castle episodes of Parzival, for example. Alternatively, the writer can arbitrarily (in a logical sense, that is) interrupt the adventures of one character by the interposition of those of another character (and another, and another, if desired), and allow their separate adventures to alternate with one another throughout the narrative. This is the process we see at work in the mixing of Gawain's adventures with Perceval's. Orlando Furioso uses both these methods consistently, and Ariosto's less sympathetic critics would say that this is typical of the excesses in which he indulged.

There are three major actions in Orlando Furioso: the war between the Saracens and Charlemagne; the pursuit of Angelica, chiefly by Orlando and Rinaldo, and incidentally by any other knight who happens to catch sight of her; and the thwarted attempts at a reunion between Ruggiero and Bradamant. To use Ariosto's terminology, these are the warp threads in his tapestry, the threads that span the length of his work. The weft threads consist of the adventures of the one hundred and one minor characters who, while still being associated with the warp threads, cut across the main design. These characters can be knights from either army engaged in personal skirmishes, passing strangers drawn in by Angelica's very obvious charms, or by the need for assistance from Rinaldo's, Orlando's, or Ruggiero's knightly prowess, or associates of Atlas in his attempts to keep Ruggiero and Bradamant apart. Furthermore, at times of awe-inspiring contrivance, these characters can be

associated with all three major actions at once, as in the beautiful episode in Atlas's magic castle, where everyone is endlessly pursuing that which he most desires.

The art of this technique (and it is considerable, despite the apparent facility with which Ariosto practises it) involves telling as many stories as possible at the same time, without losing the thread of any. As is obvious from the maltreatment it suffered at the hands of eager but inept sixteenth- and seventeenth-century romance writers, this is an extremely difficult form to handle. It is not enough simply to interrupt one adventure at any point with any other adventure. There may be no logical reason why one episode should follow another at that particular point, but there are artistic considerations which should determine the nature of the sequence. A skilled practitioner of the form will keep in mind variations in tone, texture, and style. If we take Canto XIII of Orlando Furioso as an example, we can see on a small scale the kind of achievement Ariosto maintains with commendable regularity throughout his work.

Canto XIII begins in Aristo's usual manner with a short introductory note from the poet himself on the extraordinary good luck of knights of old in finding beautiful maidens in the most unlikely places - in this case, in the gloomy cave upon which Orlando has chanced. The matter-of-fact tone of the opening then gives way to the maiden's pitiful lament as she explains her predicament. It is a well-worn story, but it is told with a pathetic charm, "punctuated

with many a sob and sigh, enough to move asps and vipers to compassion".[6] It also has an exotic Saracen as its heroine, who no sooner finishes her story than her captor brigands arrive, prompting a welcome return to violent action as Orlando exterminates them. Only the old woman guarding her in the absence of the brigands escapes, and the narrative turns to follow her flight until she comes across an unnamed warrior by the bank of a river. Ariosto leaves this episode to be continued at a later date and returns to Orlando, who continues on his way with the rescued maiden, until they also meet a knight, this time a captive. Again the adventure is left hanging while Ariosto returns to Bradamant, whom he had previously "left languishing in Love's toils".[7]

Bradamant has been putting her frustration to constructive purpose, visiting vengeance on the pagan hordes. She is interrupted by the enchantress Melissa, who has come to tell her how to rescue Ruggiero from the magic of Atlas's castle. She must go to the castle where Atlas will apear in the form of Ruggiero and she must slay him, overcoming any qualms she may feel at apparently killing the one she loves. Bradamant firmly resolves not to weaken as before, and sets off with Melissa.

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6 Ludovico Ariosto, Orlando Furioso, English prose translation by Guido Waldman (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 131.

7 Orlando Furioso, p. 132.

Ariosto has brought us through pathos and spectacular action to the very definite charms of magic. It is a nice idea to force Bradamant to kill the image of Ruggiero in order to free him from Atlas's trickery, and it is of pressing interest to the reader to see if once again Atlas's magic will prove stronger than the reason of this sensible, hard-headed warrior-damsel.

With this in prospect, Ariosto could spare some time for a diverting resumé of Bradamant's future female issue, all women of mercy, courage, prudence, and matchless continence. Melissa finishes her account just as they approach Atlas's castle and she leaves Bradamant with her instructions. But once again Bradamant trusts her heart rather than her head, and she is caught in Atlas's spell. Ariosto leaves her there, with just a touch of resigned forbearance for human foibles, and prepares us for a review of the Saracen army, which is about to parade in strength. But before leaving Bradamant he comments:

> be not dismayed to hear that she remains imprisoned in the spell--when the time is ripe for her to be released from it, I shall bring her away, and Ruggiero too. As varying the dishes quickens the appetite, so it is with my story: the more varied it is, the less likely it is to bore my listeners./ To complete the tapestry on which I am working I feel the need for a great variety of strands.[8]

The "variety" in Ariosto's strands does not simply refer to the multiplicity of actions which he manages to keep threading through his tale. It also refers to variations in the speed of the narrative, such as in the rallentando from the breath-taking

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8 Orlando Furioso, p. 136.

haste of Orlando's disposal of the brigands to the leisurely pace of Melissa's forecasting. The emotional pitch varies from the pathos of Isobel's tale to the excitement of Orlando's battle, to Bradamant's quiet searching of heart and mind before the encounter with Atlas/Ruggiero. The tone alters with Ariosto's changing attitude towards the different tales he tells, as between his slightly ironic but pleasantly amused narration of Isobel's story and the more sympathetic approach to Bradamant's waverings and surrender. Finally, the narrative mode itself constantly changes: in Canto XIII first person narrative gives way to dramatic action, which in turn is replaced by dialogue, then discourse, then reflection, then description.

In view of the conventional nature of variation in all forms of literary practice in the Middle Ages, it would be foolish to suggest that Ariosto cultivated this manner of amplification simply to portray the romance experience to its best effect. But that it does work well in romance, particularly when combined with a narrative voice sensitive to the diverse charms (and absurdities) of its material, is at once obvious in the Orlando Furioso. The blend of realistic description and magical enchantments, of rational misgivings and capitulation to the pathetic, earned it immense popularity with its sixteenth-century Italian audience and the subsequent enthusiastic admiration of Spenser, Scott, Voltaire, and Byron.[9] Yet Orlando Furioso was almost universally condemned

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[9] If we can judge by the number of new editions of this work appearing over the last few years, it also seems to be undergoing a modern revival, with Ballantine, Penguin and Oxford University Press all publishing new paperback translations.

by contemporary scholars. The grounds of their condemnation lay in the question of poetic unity.

The sixteenth-century revival of interest in the classical conception of the well-made narrative brought with it strict prescription on what constituted a unified action. Tasso, for example, saw unity only as a reflection of the logical order of the writer's mind which found literary expression in the relationship of beginning, middle and end according to probability and necessity.[10] He could then argue that Orlando Furioso, as a sequel to Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato, ignored the question of unity altogether, that its length made any impression of unity impossible, and that, most important of all, since some sections could be removed without the whole falling to pieces, and since not every section performed a necessary function in the logic of the whole, it lacked the coherence of a fully integrated work.

In these terms, Tasso's criticism is obviously valid: the intricate interweaving of discrete episodes in Ariosto's narrative makes the discrimination between beginning, middle and end a difficult enough task, without entering upon the determination of their probable or necessary relationships. Furthermore, the conclusion of Orlando Furioso seems to have been achieved at the expense of a genuine resolution. The Saracens' war with Charlemagne

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10 This summary of Tasso's criticism is taken from a more detailed account of the Discorsi del Poema Eroica given by William W. Ryding in Structure in Medieval Narrative (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

is concluded not with a decisive battle but with the fairly amicable decision to pit the three pagan heroes against the three Christian champions. Neither Rinaldo nor Orlando win Angelica; they are merely cured of their love for her. And finally, Ruggiero does not prove his right to Bradamant by the proposed duel with his rival, Leo; instead Leo withdraws his claim to Bradamant on learning of Ruggiero's identity. Calm pervades the final pages as the loose ends, with some contrivance, are woven in, as once unreasonable men sit down and listen to reasonable arguments, and as tired warriors relax and enjoy the celebration of Ruggiero's marriage to Bradamant. It is a reconciliation seemingly won by weariness more than anything else, yet it is accompanied by a spirit of exultation, as Ariosto celebrates his own personal triumph in reaching the end of his narrative:

> Now if my chart tells me true, the harbour will soon be in sight and I may hope to fulfil my vow ashore to One who has accompanied me on so long a voyage. Oh, how I paled at the prospect of returning with but a crippled ship, or perhaps of wandering forever! But I think I see . . . yes, I do see land, I see the welcoming shore./ I can hear a thunder of rejoicing--the air quivers, the sea rumbles with it; I hear a shrill of trumpets drowned by the mighty roar of the crowd. Now I begin to discern who these people are who fill both shores of the harbour. They all seem delighted that I have reached the end of so long a voyage./[11]

If the end of Orlando Furioso is less a resolution than a hiatus, it is also true of the ending that we accept it as such; that is, that we experience a sense of completion and find satisfaction in the

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11 Orlando Furioso, p. 557.

placing of the last full stop. This satisfaction is not the product of the successful solutions of complications and tension within the structure of the action but the product of the successful completion of the narrative process. While our journey through the narrative may lack the pleasures and certainties of a unified conception of the route, its elaborate windings and weavings genuinely seem to warrant the kind of elation evident in Ariosto's sighting of his destination. Ariosto has brought us home - admittedly not by the most direct path, but then there are no short-cuts to our desires in Ariosto's world, precisely because those desires have very little to do with the kind of reasoning and foresight that makes the shortest route between two points a practical concern. As with any quest, the value of Ariosto's journey is measured by the difficulty of its execution. Under his impartial, though not uncritical, benevolence, Ariosto has yoked together divergent experiences to produce that sense of unity in expansive generosity that was to be the guiding force - and perhaps the chief virtue - of Sterne in Tristram Shandy.

Nevertheless, it was not generosity but prescription that was subsequently to be the constructive principle that governed romance, both in its heroic and didactic manifestation. The neoclassicism of French heroic romance, for example, valued neither endearing eccentricity in characters nor all-embracing enthusiasm in design. It favoured instead a more generalized approach to human nature and a "perfect pattern of virtuous Love and truly merited Honour".[12]

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12 From the translator's Preface to Cassandre (1703), in Novel and Romance, 1700 - 1800: A Documentary Record, ed. Ioan Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 4.

The theoretical basis of heroic romance was drawn from the classic epic, and, as Arthur L. Cooke has demonstrated, it bears a striking resemblance to that espoused by the early eighteenth-century novelists.[13] Among the major similarities that Cooke notes are the insistence that the works be regarded as "history" rather than fiction, the importance of probability, both to character and action, and the concern with a moral purpose. In view of the kind of criticism of romance prevalent in the eighteenth century, the acceptance of the need for probability may seem surprizing, but equally unexpected is the common concern for action unified by its relevance to a principal aim. Cooke cites Mlle de Scudéry's emphasis on the relationship of all episodes to the main action:

> . . . in imitation of the Epique Poem there is a principall action whereunto all the rest, which raign over all the work, are fastned, and which makes them that they are not imployed, but for the conducting of it to its perfection. . . . It is not because the episodes . . . are not rather beauties, than defects; but it is always necessary, that the adress of him which imployes them should hold them in some sort to this principall action, to the end, that by this ingenious concatenation, all the parts of them should make but one body, and that nothing may be seen in them which is loose and unprofitable.[14]

Despite this sharing of a common theoretical framework, a good deal of intellectual energy, in eighteenth-century novelists and commentators alike, was devoted to a rejection of romance. The specific objection made to the failure of romance, notwithstanding

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13 Arthur L. Cooke, "Henry Fielding and the Writers of Heroic Romance", PMLA, LXXII (1947), 984 - 994.

14 ibid., p. 989.

its professed intention, to provide a probable and unified action, can partly be explained as the result of an inevitable discrepancy between theory and practice. But perhaps more fundamental to the quarrel was the changing attitude towards both probability as such and the related question of the precise nature of a unified action. The issues can best be clarified by reference to the criticism of two eighteenth-century commentators, Samuel Johnson and Thomas Holcroft. Johnson maintained that romances "exhibited only the superficial appearances of action, related the events but omitted the causes".[15] Action needed to be probable not only in its nature but also in terms of its specific context, so that the reader understood not simply how something could happen but more importantly why it should happen, and to a particular person at a particular time. Probability in this sense will influence the whole structure of the narrative and consequently its unity, and it is to the failure of romances to provide this kind of specifically narrative coherence that Holcroft directs his criticism:

> Plot they had none, and but one moral distributed through the endless pages of endless volumes.[16]

Action unified under a coherent plot rather than by reference to an underlying concept such as love or honour was the chief formal

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15 Samuel Johnson, Preface to The Plays of Shakespeare (1765), in Johnson: Prose and Poetry, ed. Mona Wilson (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), p. 510.

16 Thomas Holcroft, Preface to Alwyn: or The Gentleman Comedian (1780), in Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 46.

characteristic which distinguished the novel from heroic romance. The praise bestowed by Arthur Murphy on Fielding's work, for example, is indicative of the contemporary enthusiasm for a technique which so structured the action that

> incident arises out of incident; the seeds of every thing that shoots up, are laid with a judicious hand, and whatever occurs in the latter part of the story, seems naturally to grow out of those passages which preceded; so that, upon the whole, the business with great propriety and probability works itself up into various embarrassment, and then afterwards, by a regular series of events, clears itself from all impediments, and brings itself inevitably to a conclusion.[17]

This closely-knit action was also the major difference between the novel and the picaresque tale. Both took issue with the tendency of romance to convert an ideal into a ridiculously stylized pretence of the actual, and both prided themselves on their ability to confine themselves to the recognizable world of ordinary human activity. Novelists, however, were largely content with an impression of actuality, for their realism was cultivated in order to serve a larger moral purpose. Picaresque fiction, on the other hand, was roguish both in substance and design, and showed little concern for the utility of ordinary people in everyday situations for inculcating contemporary standards of behaviour. Indeed, if we view realism as a technique rather than as an effect, we find

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17 Arthur Murphy, Introduction to The Works of Henry Fielding, Esq.; with the life of the Author, in The Lives of Henry Fielding and Samuel Johnson, ed. Matthew Grace (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1968), p. 263.

that a good deal of the attention of recent generic criticism of the novel would more profitably be bestowed upon picaresque fiction. The realistic mode, in the sense of the circumstantial particularization of the contingent, would seem to have its genesis in the picaresque, where details of character and environment are determined by the context of the action in a factual world rather than by their relevance to a thematic or structural design. It is the latter which has dominated the novel from its very beginnings. The moral didacticism of Richardson, for example, seeks universalized processes of virtue and reward, vice and punishment behind the contingent, and the formal design of Fielding's work seeks a significant pattern behind the circumstantial.

It is the rhythm of short-lived success followed by the inevitable disaster that is the dominant structural feature of the picaresque tale. There is little sense of unity other than that provided by the presence of the protagonist and, indeed, little sense of a composite whole. Lazarillo de Tormes provides a rare example of a serious attempt to ground the characteristically episodic structure in a substantial beginning and end, and, even then, it is only on reflection that the tale is bound into a whole by an awareness of the sudden irony of Lazarillo's unconscious adoption of the role of victim at the end. Other picaresque narratives, such as Gil Blas and The Unfortunate Traveller, wander from adventure to adventure, maintaining an interest based on diversity and surprise. Part of the joy of reading picaresque fiction is in the feeling that a world of endless possibilities

awaits us, and this to a certain extent compensates for the discomposure inherent in its open-ended structure.

In the novel we find a different kind of pleasure: not that of the open road but that of the stricter confines of the river, as Arthur Murphy's comparison illustrates. After discussing the construction of the plot of Tom Jones, he describes its effect as being

> like a river, which, in its progress, foams amongst fragments of rocks, and for a while seems pent up by unsurmountable oppositions; then angrily dashes for a while, then plunges under ground into caverns, and runs a subterraneous course, till at length it breaks out again, meanders round the country, and with a clear placid stream flows gently into the ocean.[18]

The analogy with the compression, the gathering momentum, the predetermined course and the specific destination of the river admirably illuminates the origins of the special delight which accompanies a well designed plot. A method of narrative construction which conformed so well with Aristotle's dictate, that "the component events ought to be so firmly compacted that if any one of them is shifted to another place, or removed, the whole is loosened up and dislocated",[19] had an obvious appeal to critics with an Aristotelean bent, such as James Beattie, Arthur Murphy, Henry Pye, and James Burnett. Yet even in a novelist like Smollett,

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18 Introduction to The Works of Henry Fielding, Esq., pp. 263 - 264.

19 Aristotle, Poetics, trans. Gerald F. Else (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1970), p. 32.

whose sympathies are with the diffuseness and comprehensiveness of the picaresque, we find a similar insistence on the presence of a uniform plan. The "grand essential rule of unity" and its satisfaction in a coherent plot were the chief preoccupations of novelists and critics alike in the eighteenth-century.

Having acknowledged this much, we should now embark on the necessary qualifications, for in focusing on ways in which one genre is distinguished from another, it is easy to forget ways in which they remain similar. As fundamental as action unified by plot was to the development of the novel, equally important to novelists were the continuing concerns of all narrative art. In fact the major contribution of the novel to contemporary fiction could well be seen as the redirection of energy towards narrative as such. Jerry C. Beasley has observed of didactic romances that they

> typically sacrifice narrative values to a moral purpose. Specifically, they usually advance rationalistic principles of ethics, theology, and politics as solutions to the problems encountered by a hero.[20]

By the internal consistency of action constructed on the basis of probability, novelists not only extricated their characters from complications by forces within the structure of the action, they also fulfilled a more basic narrative requirement. In combination with characters and events selected from the normal spectrum of human life, probability gained the reader's belief in an age which

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20 Jerry C. Beasley, "Romance and the 'New' Novels of Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett", 439.

was not readily disposed to accept the inexplicable or the unknown. As moralists, novelists could make use of this belief to press home the personal and social relevance of moral precepts illustrated in a fictional form; as entertainers, they could take advantage of actions which, "not being so different from our Belief", "bring also the pleasure nearer us";[21] and finally as story-tellers, they could give us

> a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own.[22]

It is in their capacity as story-tellers that I wish to discuss two early novelists, Fielding and Sterne. As plot-makers, both have received considerable critical attention, though in the case of Sterne this attention has generally been directed towards coming to terms with a bête noire.[23] Yet both also offer a fine example of

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21 William Congreve, Preface to Incognita (1692; rpt. Menston, Yorkshire: The Scholar Press, 1971), p. iii.

22 Clara Reeve, The Progress of Romance (1875), Vol. I, Evening vii, in Novelists on the Novel, p. 47.

23 Assessments of the plot of Tristram Shandy range from the observation that it is "relatively unimportant" (Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel, New York, Rinehart, 1953, p. 83), to the decision that there is "enough" plot (Denis Donoghue, "Sterne: Our Contemporary", in The Winged Skull, Papers from the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference, London, Methuen, 1971, p. 48), to the judgement that Tristram Shandy is so highly plotted that it is the most typical novel in world literature (Victor Shklovsky, "Tristram Shandy: Stylistic Commentary" in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays , pp. 25 - 57).

the value of that older tradition of narrative art which sought not only to "excite and gratify curiosity" but also to "engage the passions".[24] Despite their commitment to interests which extend beyond the story-telling impulse, novelists - and indeed romancers - were still basically people with a story to tell. By exploring in detail the narrative structure of the novels of Fielding and Sterne, we can see the extent to which the novel departs from the concerns of romance, and can also judge something of the scope of a narrative art in which action responds to the counterpointing rhythms of plot and story.

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24 John Hawkesworth, The Adventurer, No. 4, Saturday, November 18, 1752, in Novel and Romance, 1700 - 1800, p. 191.

CHAPTER 6

The Fidelities of the Plot and the Rights of the Story in Tom Jones

Although Fielding was content to call Joseph Andrews a "comic romance", his objections to romance are even in that work apparent, and by the time he came to write Tom Jones he felt it wiser to avoid the term altogether. In Joseph Andrews he ridicules "those persons of surprising genius, the authors of immense romances" who,

> without any assistance from nature or history, record persons who never were, or will be, and facts which never did, nor possibly can, happen; whose heroes are of their own creation, and their brains the chaos whence all their materials are collected.[1]

The introductory chapters of Tom Jones are interspersed with disparaging references to romance, most of which, like the example just quoted from Joseph Andrews, question the mentality of those who write such works. In Book IV of Tom Jones, for example, he refers to "those idle Romances which are filled with Monsters, the Productions, not of Nature, but of distempered Brains",[2] and in Book IX he ends a lengthier discussion of the failings of romance writers with the captious comment that their works proceed from "a Looseness of the Brain" (IX, i; I, p. 489).

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1 Henry Fielding, Joseph Andrews and Shamela, ed. Martin C. Battestin (London: Methuen, 1965), III, i, p. 158. Further citations from this edition will be made parenthetically.

2 Henry Fielding, Tom Jones, ed. Martin C. Battestin and Fredson Bowers, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), IV, i (I, p. 150). Further citations from this edition will be made parenthetically, with book and chapter references preceding volume and page number relevant to this edition.

Confronted with such forthright criticism of the genre, critics are quick to seize on Fielding's apparent inconsistency, evident in the presence of the numerous romance motifs which they find in his work. While R. S. Crane and E. M. W. Tillyard have both commented on Tom's resemblance to the typical romance lover,[3] Sheridan Baker, in the fullest account of romance elements in Fielding, lists the "babies exchanged in the cradle, lovers taken as brother and sister, the gold amulet tied to Joseph's arm, the strawberry mark, the gentle lineage" in Joseph Andrews,[4] and the device of the basketed lover, the foster brother, the use of disguise, and the long-lost inheritance in Amelia.[5] Sheridan Baker also traces the one typical "romance plot", the "ancient daydream of recognition and fairy treasure", through all Fielding's novels.[6]

Even without taking issue with Sheridan Baker over the possibility of his "romance plot" being a story pattern common to all forms of narrative and not simply to romance,[7] I would maintain that it is still possible to deliver Fielding from the charge of inconsistency simply by re-examining the focus of his criticism.

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3 R. S. Crane, "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones", pp. 616 - 647; E. M. W. Tillyard, "On Tom Jones", in The Epic Strain in the English Novel (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), p. 52.

4 Sheridan Baker, "Henry Fielding's Comic Romances", Papers of the Michigan Academy, XLV (1960), 415 - 416. Henry Knight Miller has since published a more comprehensive study in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and the Romance Tradition (Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1976).

5 Sheridan Baker, Fielding's Amelia and the Materials of Romance", Philological Quarterly, XLI (1962), 437 - 449.

6 ibid., p. 445.

7 The "ancient daydream of recognition and fairy treasure" seems to be related to the "truth action", one of the two main story patterns which Richmond Lattimore maintains are to be found in all forms of narrative literature (see above, pp. 10 - 11).

The key passage is in Book IX of Tom Jones:

> To invent good Stories, and to tell them well, are possibly very rare Talents, and yet I have observed few Persons who have scrupled to aim at both; and if we examine the Romances and Novels with which the World abounds, I think we may fairly conclude, that most of the Authors would not have attempted to shew their Teeth (if the Expression may be allowed me) in any other Way of Writing; nor could indeed have strung together a dozen Sentences on any other Subject whatever. Scribimus indocti doctique passim, may be more truly said of the Historian and Biographer, than of any other Species of Writing: For all the Arts and Sciences (even Criticism itself) require some little Degree of Learning and Knowledge. Poetry indeed may perhaps be thought an Exception; but then it demands Numbers, or something like Numbers; whereas to the Composition of Novels and Romances, nothing is necessary but Paper, Pens and Ink, with the manual Capacity of using them. This, I conceive, their Productions shew to be the Opinion of the Authors themselves; and this must be the Opinion of their Readers, if indeed there be any such.
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> Hence we are to derive that universal Contempt, which the World, who always denominate the Whole from the Majority, have cast on all historical Writers, who do not draw their Materials from Records. And it is the Apprehension of this Contempt, that hath made us so cautiously avoid the Term Romance, a name with which we might otherwise have been well enough contented. Though as we have good Authority for all our Characters, no less indeed than the vast authentic Doomsday-Book of Nature, as is elsewhere hinted, our Labours have sufficient Title to the Name of History.
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> (IX, i; I, pp. 488 - 489. Footnote omitted.)

Fielding's criticism of romance is certainly emphatic, but to argue inconsistency from the presence of romance correspondences in his novels is to assume that the energy of his stricture implies an absolute rejection. Such an argument would seem precipitate, especially when the passage quoted suggests Fielding's reasons for dissociating his work from romance are mainly politic. Fielding plainly has reservations about the genre, but he does not condemn it outright. The nature of those reservations can best be illuminated

by the comment Eugene Vinaver makes on the distinction between epic and romance:

> What distinguishes one literary generation or one epoch from another is surely not the stories people tell but the way they tell them.[8]

Fielding's objections to romance support this hypothesis. In the quoted passage he does not question the ability of romance writers to invent good stories. Neither, is he averse to using those stories for his own purposes, as Sheridan Baker points out. What he does question is the ability of romance writers to tell their stories well.

Telling a story well, in the opinion of Fielding and many of his contemporaries, requires that

> we should ever confine ourselves strictly to nature, from the just imitation of which will flow all the pleasure we can this way convey to a sensible reader. (Author's Preface to Joseph Andrews, p. 8.)

Romance fails in this province on two major counts: it restricts itself to one single aspect of nature, that of the grave or sublime; and it ignores the "natural means" by which the world operates. Fielding directs most of his criticism against the latter failing for, while in his opinion it is the selectivity of romance which distinguishes it from the epic, it is the improbability of romance

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8 Eugene Vinaver, The Rise of Romance, pp. 1 - 2.

which distinguishes it from "True History":

> It is by falling into Fiction therefore, that we generally offend against this Rule, of deserting Probability, which the Historian seldom if ever quits, till he forsakes his Character, and commences a Writer of Romance. (Tom Jones, VIII, i; I, p. 402).

The real inadequacy of romance is not that it deserts nature by dealing in the wonderful but that it fails to provide a supporting substructure of internal probability. Fielding himself maintains that, within the restrictions imposed by his ability to make the action seem probable,

> every Writer may be permitted to deal as much in the Wonderful as he pleases; nay, if he thus keeps within the Rules of Credibility, the more he can surprize the Reader, the more he will engage his Attention, and the more he will charm him. As a Genius of the highest Rank observes in his 5th Chapter of the Bathos, 'The great Art of all Poetry is to mix Truth with Fiction; in order to join the Credible with the Surprizing.'
>
> For though every good Author will confine himself within the Bounds of Probability, it is by no means necessary that his Characters, or his Incidents, should be trite, common, or vulgar; such as happen in every Street, or in every House, or which may be met with in the home Articles of a News-paper. (Tom Jones, VIII, i; I, pp. 406 - 407.)

Thus, to confine oneself to nature is not to be limited to the commonplace world of ordinary life but to keep within the bounds of the humanly probable for the purpose of making the action seem plausible. Accordingly, Fielding will not "exceed the Capacity of the Agent we describe" (Tom Jones, VIII, i; I, p. 400); hence no muses, no gods, and only a sparing use of ghosts. Because he deals with private characters who have no public record to corroborate their authenticity, he will keep within the limits not only of

possibility, but of probability too. Finally, he will keep to actions that are "likely for the very Actors and Characters themselves to have performed" (Tom Jones, VIII, i; I, p. 405). If he observes these rules, Fielding maintains that the writer

> hath discharged his Part; and is then intitled to some Faith from his Reader, who is indeed guilty of critical Infidelity if he disbelieves him. (Tom Jones, VIII, i; I, p. 407.)

Fielding's cultivation of the faith of the reader is an important consideration to remember when attempting to reach an understanding of the exact nature of realism in the novel. Douglas Hewitt argues convincingly that realism is not a means of presenting a direct picture of a series of typical life-like experiences but a convention whose function "depends very largely on our partnership with the novelist, so that its effect is not 'like life' but like being told about life by someone we trust".[9] In this sense realism has always been a convention of any story-telling art. Stories have two basic requirements, plausibility and mutuality of feeling. Without plausibility continued emotional involvement is impossible, because in order that we may exercise our human sympathies the characters themselves must seem human and their experiences humanly relevant. As narrative art has changed, it is not the importance of plausibility that has altered but simply the requirements of plausibility. Fielding himself points out that to the ancient Greeks

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9 Douglas Hewitt, The Approach to Fiction: Good and Bad Readings of Novels (London: Longmans, 1972), p. 58.

the Marvellous was not, in fact, marvellous. They were simply capable of a different kind of belief:

> The Poet, being desirous to indulge a wanton and extravagant Imagination, took Refuge in that Power, of the Extent of which his Readers were no Judges, or rather which they imagined to be infinite, and consequently they could not be shocked at any Prodigies related of it. This hath been strongly urged in Defence of Homer's Miracles; and it is, perhaps, a Defence; not, as Mr Pope would have it, because Ulysses told a Set of foolish Lies to the Phaecians, who were a very dull Nation; but because the Poet himself wrote to Heathens, to whom poetical Fables were Articles of Faith. (Tom Jones, VIII, i; I, p. 397.)

The emergence of the Puritan religious consciousness, with its emphasis on the need for the individual to define himself by his deeds on the earthly stage, and the development of empirical rationalism, which suggested that there was a "physical world governed by laws ascertainable by the human mind",[10] conferred upon the novelist an obligation to a different system of belief. What Ian Watt sees as Realism proper, an innovation in the new genre of the novel,[11] was simply a different kind of realism, the result of a common acknowledgement by a number of writers that the romancers were flogging a dead charger, one that had died in fact nearly a century before. The exotic distance and intuitive relevance of

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10 R. W. Harris, Reason and Nature in the Eighteenth Century (London: Blandford Press, 1968), p. 10.

11 Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (1957; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968).

romance's "otherworld" offered to the eighteenth-century reader, so firmly grounded in the world of actuality, little more than an opportunity to escape into the sublimations of fantasy.[12]

By providing a rationally acceptable, motivated, causal universe, by appealing to the reader's new-found sense of himself and of his fellows as discrete individuals, the eighteenth-century novelist perceived that he could tell the same old stories yet still make them credible. The ship-wrecked traveller, the rise from rags to riches, the "ancient daydream of recognition and fairy treasure" were still the staple content of the novels of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, but now supplemented by the internal probability of a plot which ensures, as Elizabeth Bowen has said, that the novelist always has "one foot, sheer circumstantiality, to stand on, whatever the other foot may be doing".

The plot of Fielding's Tom Jones has had its ardent admirers and, predictably enough, has been subjected to quite fierce critical reaction. Confronted with the simple exuberance of Coleridge, who counts it one of "the three most perfect plots ever planned",[13]

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12 The opportunity did not, of course, go begging. The popularity of Gothic Romance in the eighteenth-century would seem to indicate that there were still some needs that could not be satisfied by mere plausibility.

13 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Table Talk, July 5, 1834, in The Table Talk and Omniana of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London: Humphrey Milford, 1917), p. 312.

the more qualified praise of Dorothy Van Ghent for its architectural achievement,[14] Arnold Kettle's decision that "there is too much plot",[15] F. R. Leavis's dismissal of any organizational distinction on the grounds that "there can't be subtlety of organization without richer matter to organize",[16] and John Preston's ambitious appraisal of the plot's power to "create a reader wise enough to create the book he reads",[17] we might well wonder if we are all looking at the same plot. Fielding's plot is certainly a masterly achievement, ostentatiously skilful in its intricate contrivance, carefully concealed clues, and adroit extrication of characters from the complications of the action. But I would also argue that it is primarily a bread-and-butter exercise, functional but all the better for its filling. If this is the case, we can hardly blame Fielding for making bread and butter seem exhilarating and hence exciting extravagant praise, but we might, I think, find reason to fault those critics who mistake an ingredient for the whole, or who must always insist on richer fare. It is ultimately by the end achieved that Fielding's plot should be judged.

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14 Dorothy Van Ghent, "On Tom Jones", in The English Novel: Form and Function (New York: Rinehart, 1956).

15 Arnold Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel (London: Hutchinson, 1951), p. 77.

16 F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (London: Chatto and Windus, 1955), p. 4.

17 John Preston, "Plot as Irony: The Readers' Role in Tom Jones", in *Tom Jones:* A Casebook, ed. Neil Compton (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 261.

Whatever else Fielding's plot may or may not do, it does create a consistent undercurrent of plausibility. The main concern of the plot is whether Tom will claim his true inheritance or fulfil the expectations inherent in his supposed parentage. Working on the basis of the rules of possibility, Fielding constructs the broad outline of his plot. The first question to be decided is whether it is possible for the truth of Tom's concealed parentage to be revealed. This possibility will exist if (a) either parent lives long enough to change his or her mind about keeping the parentage secret, or (b) either parent is forced, by circumstances attendant upon the birth of the child, to take another less scrupulous person into his or her confidence. Possibility is thus relatively clear-cut: if the agents are human they must give birth in the accepted fashion and stand a chance of surviving, they cannot disappear for the tell-tale months without explanation, and generally they must engage some assistance. Bridget lives long enough for (a) and is forced to adopt (b).

Fielding can, however, complicate the situation by decreasing the likelihood of either of these possibilities of revelation materializing. He can dispose of the most unreliable witnesses to the fact of the birth. Mr Summer, by virtue of his inherent goodness, cannot be counted upon to keep silent. Nor can Jenny Jones, because she is merely incidentally involved. Hence both are dispatched, by death and banishment respectively. Fielding can then increase the probability of the remaining parent's silence by giving her a vigorous sense of social awareness, a subsequent husband intent on

protecting his claim to the line of inheritance, and a rival for her motherly affections in the form of a legitimate son.

Armed with these initial possibilities both for and against revelation, Fielding can feel justified in leading the reader the merry dance he does. From the first pronouncement by Miss Deborah that Tom will grow up to imitate a "mother" who only escaped Bridewell by Squire Allworthy's mercy, opinion against Tom grows until it is "the universal Opinion of all Mr Allworthy's Family, that he was certainly born to be hanged" (III, ii; I, p. 118). At regular intervals, as opinion gains support from the evidence of Tom's misdeeds, this judgement is repeated, often in a confidentially indirect fashion as if Fielding were nudging the reader about a private joke they share. References to Tom's reserved fate gather momentum as Tom approaches his predicted end,[18] and the reader uncomfortably comes to recognize that what he has been regarding as an extravagant jest is beginning to seem a legally and perhaps morally just conclusion to the whole affair.

At the same time, however, as Fielding has been emphasizing the chances of Tom's hanging, he has also been ensuring that the alternative conclusion remains as a possible option. One by one he has been eliminating obstacles which hinder the revelation of Tom's true inheritance. The likelihood of Bridget's holding her tongue is lessened, first by the consequence of having a good and handsome

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18 References to Tom's reserved fate occur at the following intervals: pp. 176, 216, 432, 625, 676, 724, 816, 864, 875, 876, 951, 960.

natural son to rival her repulsive legitimate son in claims to her motherly affection, secondly by the death of her husband, who was intent on protecting the line of inheritance through Blifil, and finally by the effect of her own imminent death of diminishing the constraint of social disapproval. Bridget eventually recants, and if the initial effectiveness of the recantation is reduced by its occurrence on a journey to London, the probability of meeting with the banished witness, the alternative means of revelation, can also be improved by travel. By building the plot around the pursuit of Sophia, Fielding can assemble in London all the characters essential for the final revelation of Tom's birth. Tom is drawn after Sophia for reasons which he tries to disguise even from himself; Squire Western and his sister pursue her in order to save Sophia for their kind of marriage; Squire Allworthy and Blifil follow in order to secure Sophia's supposed inclinations towards the latter; Partridge goes with Tom; and Jenny Jones with Mr Fitzpatrick, who was seeking his wife, with whom Sophia had stayed for a while. Mr Dowling is the only important witness to the secret of Tom's birth whose presence in London cannot be accounted for by the presence there of Sophia.

These two movements, then, constitute the main structural supports of the plot. The superiority of the plot of Tom Jones to the plot of Joseph Andrews lies in Fielding's ability to make both movements flow from one set of circumstances, so that either outcome is continually present as a viable option. In Joseph Andrews the sudden reversals of fortune at the end may have a certain charm

in their unpredictability, but the effect of inevitability is diminished by the recourse to means of revelation that are independent of the main line of the action.

But the inferiority of the plot in Joseph Andrews is not so much evidence of a failure in Fielding's narrative skill as evidence of a different intention, a different means of achieving a different end. If the episodes of discovery upon discovery which conclude Joseph Andrews deny Fielding the opportunity to create a sense of plausibility through the inevitability of a causal progression, they do emphasize the feeling which the characters have of helplessness over their futures and the importance of the role of Providence in deciding ultimate ends. It is a humbling experience, and the atmosphere of the wedding reflects this awareness, with Joseph in his neat, plain suit, and Fanny in her white dimity nightgown taking part in a solemn, simple ceremony. It is not just a celebration of the simpler virtues of the country; it is a reflection of the awareness of the mere humanity of man in the face of Providence, an awareness which has been growing throughout the novel.

If Joseph Andrews remains in any sense a parody of Pamela beyond the initial chapters it is in this affirmation of the merely human nature of Joseph's virtue and his helplessness in bringing about his own reward. Joseph's stance at the beginning of the novel is the closest thing to male virtue that can be achieved without surrendering all sense of reality and provoking ridicule. He is strong, handsome, educated, has a sweet voice, is kind to his parents, loving to his sister, has an innocent desire to please, and is, of

course, eminently desirable. He has his virtue and is tender of it. He asserts it forcibly and uncomprisingly in the face of Lady Booby's suggestions, and goes so far as to eject Betty the chambermaid from his room in defence of it. But from this point onwards events turn out to be more and more beyond Joseph's control. The further the narrative progresses, the less reliable his friends prove, the more pernicious his enemies, and the more staggering his set-backs. Physical beatings give way to schemes and plots, and finally to revelations which are seemingly irreversible, until Joseph is finally forced to accept that he can do nothing to change his situation.

Tom is brought to a similar predicament, but in his case he has arrived there partly under his own steam, and must to a considerable extent blame himself rather than Fortune. Although it is in Amelia that Fielding most fully investigates the "natural means" by which Fortune recognizably works, Tom Jones still represents a development in Fielding's concern with natural explanations for the course of events. Within the previously described boundaries of possible outcomes, the plot of Tom Jones operates on the basis that the world is an interconnecting mechanism:

> The World may indeed be considered as a vast Machine, in which the great Wheels are originally set in Motion by those which are very minute, and almost imperceptible to any but the strongest Eyes. (Tom Jones, V, iv; I, p. 225.)

By carefully describing the operations of these minute wheels, Fielding produces the "nice Train of little Circumstances" (Tom Jones, XVIII, ii; II, p. 916) which forms the substance of his plot.

The instance which provokes the comment about the world as a vast machine is the apparently insignificant incident when Sophia rescues her muff from the flames where it was tossed by her disconcerted father, producing a violent effect upon poor Jones. The muff has acquired associations for both the young people, and has become a symbol of their affection. As such, its physical presence will result in Tom's (and incidentally Squire Western's) pursuit of Sophia after the scene at the inn at Upton. The sight of the muff prompts Tom, at this pivotal point in the novel, to return his attention to Sophia, since it reminds him of her and the feelings he has for her. Similarly, the mention of the "nice Train of little Circumstances" is occasioned by a reference to the sequence of events which denied Tom the opportunity to enter into serious conversation with Mrs Waters and thus discover that she was his supposed mother.

Explanations such as this inject into the narrative a sense of credibility: they keep that one foot firmly planted on the ground of sheer circumstantiality. But they also have another function. By presenting the world as a machine whose workings are accessible to observation, Fielding is introducing, by way of the plot, a method of following the action which is different in kind to that which is present in reading a story. To follow a plot the reader must use both his eyes and his mind: he will not only observe the action but will also perceive discrepancies between professed character and observed action and draw the necessary conclusions. For, as Fielding remarks,

> The former of these is unavoidable by those who have any Eyes, and the latter is perhaps no less certain and necessary a Consequence of our having any Brains. (XI, x; II, p. 616.)

Fielding does admit that mankind is fallible and that conclusions will not always follow neatly and accurately from one's carefully made observations, even if one is a Fielding:

> To be placed above the reach of deceit is to be placed above the rank of a human being; sure I am that I make no pretension to be of that rank.[19]

But Fielding still maintains that mankind (and mankind includes both his characters and his readers) does not have to be quite as fallible as it usually insists on being. That man can know, that the world exists to be analysed and comprehended, is the basic philosophy that governs Fielding's presentation of his plot.

The function of the plot in Tom Jones is to show the reader, and to teach Tom, that in order to survive in this world man must take advantage of his capacity for perception and intelligent judgement. Tom's very nature prevents him from exercising that "vast Quicksightedness into Evil" (XI, x; II, p. 615) which is capable of protecting even the meanest of men from the malicious designs of others, but he should be able to acquire that prudence which Sophia so admirably possesses. It is "the Faculty of seeing what is before your Eyes, and of drawing Conclusions from what you see" (XI, x; II, p. 616), the layman's equivalent of the "Genius" which the novelist

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19 quoted by W. L. Cross in The History of Henry Fielding, 3 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918), II, p. 299.

needs. Fielding describes genius as discovery or penetration and the discernment of differences, and it seems to be these same powers which contribute to the prudence Sophia exhibits when, for example, she "conceived an Opinion, that her Cousin was really no better than she should be" (XI, x; II, p. 616). Tom's misfortunes are as much the result of his failure to make use of his powers of discrimination as of his failure to practise discretion, that other, less admirable, aspect of prudence.

Because the plot is based on the illumination of relationships between characters and events, it is fitting that its climax is reached not with the act of supposed incest but with Tom's recognition of the roles his own folly and vice have played in bringing him to the gravest of moral sins. However much the reader may appreciate Tom's abundance of natural virtues, he must also be aware that those virtues, like the prudence Tom is encouraged to acquire, can also have their undesirable aspects. Tom's acceptance of Lady Bellaston's "patronage", for example, is in keeping with Tom's particular concept of honour, and in theory it can be judged to be an honourable decision. But the consequences of Tom's decision take him beyond the isolation of theoretical concerns. In the context of practical morality he is a kept man, implicitly subscribing to the values of a society neither he, nor Fielding, nor the reader, admires. Similarly, Tom's willingness to satisfy the passion he arouses in women can be seen partly as a result of his generous nature, but such indiscriminate generosity must carry with it the possibility of the shame and sorrow Tom so narrowly escapes. In a world which

runs according to greed, ambition, and interest, in which people are revealed to be deceiving themselves and others as to their real intentions, where motivation can be adduced to show how even apparently sincere actions can be prompted by baser impulses, the line of causation which almost succeeds in convicting Tom of incest, and hanging him, can be satisfactorily broken only by Tom's realization of the need for discretion and prudence.

It is with supreme aptness that Fielding makes prudence, "the rational use of probability",[20] the end of a plot which is so much concerned with probability. And perhaps it is an appreciation of the organic unity thus achieved that is behind Irvin Ehrenpreis's pronouncement that it is at this point that the narrative really ends. Tom's marriage to Sophia is seen as something of a formality, the real interest in the novel lying in the question of whether Tom deserves Sophia rather than in whether he will marry her:

> The story of the novel really ends, therefore, not when Tom marries Sophia, but when he becomes worthy of her.[21]

It is, however, the plot, not the story, which is resolved here, and if we look at the scene in which Tom is supposed to achieve the necessary change which suddenly makes him worthy of Sophia, we soon realize that this is no place for a narrative to end. Tom's acceptance of responsibility for his misfortunes is presented in

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20 "Prudence" is so defined by William B. Coley in "The Background of Fielding's Laughter", ELH, XXVI (1959), 251.

21 Irvin Ehrenpreis, Fielding: *Tom Jones*, p. 54.

a manner which is deliberately low-key and just a little ludicrous:

> 'Sure,' cries Jones, 'Fortune will never have done with me, till she hath driven me to Distraction. But why do I blame Fortune? I am myself the Cause of all my Misery. All the dreadful Mischiefs which have befallen me, are the Consequences only of my own Folly and Vice. (XVIII, ii; II, pp. 915 - 916.)

This is followed by the infamous lament of "Incest--with a Mother!" and "the most violent and frantic Agonies of Grief and Despair" (XVIII, ii; II, p. 916). Our moral and intellectual susceptibilities may be satisfied at this point - and not before time, we might justly add. But Fielding has already made clear that his ultimate concern, as that of his story, is with neither the intellect nor conventional morality. After the crucial scene at the Upton inn, Fielding comments:

> . . . wise and good Men may consider what happened to Jones at Upton as a just Punishment for his Wickedness, with Regard to Women, of which it was indeed the immediate Consequence; and silly and bad persons may comfort themselves in their Vices, by flattering their own Hearts that the Characters of Men are rather owing to Accident than to Virtue. Now perhaps the Reflections which we should be here inclined to draw, would alike contradict both these Conclusions, and would shew that these Incidents contribute only to confirm the great, useful and uncommon Doctrine, which it is the Purpose of this whole Work to inculcate (XII, viii; II, p. 652) (my italics).

The events at the inn at Upton mark the turning point in Tom's relationship with Sophia. It is assumed by Sophia's companions that she leaves distressed by the discovery of Tom's liaison with Jenny Jones. But what turns out to be the most serious obstacle to Tom's winning of Sophia's affections is not a failure of morality in, for example, this "Indulgence with the Person of another Woman". Nor is

it a failure of intelligence or prudence, again, in his inability to constrain his passions or cloak their activities with discretion. It is not, in fact, a failure on his part at all, merely a misunderstanding on the part of Sophia, who believed that Tom had traduced her name among the mean and vulgar at the inn. Tom owed his present misfortune to "the supposed Want of that Delicacy with which he so abounded" (XII, viii; II, p. 651), that sensitivity to the rights and feelings of others which revealed itself in a respect for Sophia's name. The subsequent action, therefore, does not have to prove that Tom is in any other way worthy of Sophia; it must simply reassert Tom's right to Sophia by testing the ability of his special virtue to survive the dangerous implications of his not-so-special vices.

It is the ultimate value of this virtue above all others that is Fielding's "great, useful and uncommon Doctrine", and it is through the medium of the story that it is inculcated. We read stories not because of our intellectual interest in the concept of life they present, nor because of our moral interest in the organization of their ethics, but because of our emotional involvement in an experience about which we are concerned. By using this involvement, Fielding can accomplish something that the force of reason and argument can never do: he can inculcate his doctrine by making the reader experience firsthand that sympathy for the rights and feelings of others which we find so praiseworthy in Tom.

The vehicle of this involvement is the emotional pattern of the story. This pattern begins with a ground situation that presents a grouping of characters whose relations with their environment or with each other are in some way unstable. It is this initial instability that precipitates movement, but the desire to follow that movement depends upon an interest based on "our strongest, most elemental feelings of sympathy with and antipathy for our fellows".[22] The ground situation must therefore provide not only the seeds of change but also characters about whom we are made to care.[23]

In simple tales where, for example, morality determines the response to characters, introductions can be short and perfunctory, with the main action beginning almost immediately. Formal simplicity need not be an undesirable attribute, and Richardson's Clarissa is a fine example of the emotional impact that can be achieved by the use of morality to establish an affective commitment. From the very beginning of Clarissa an intense emotional response is elicited from the reader. Even without the intimacy which the letters develop between reader and heroine, there would have been little need for the reader to have had a preliminary correspondence with Clarissa in

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22 W. B. Gallie, Philosophy and the Historical Understanding, p. 45.

23 Sheldon Sacks, in drawing the distinction between apologue and "represented action", makes a similar observation, noting that in the latter "characters about whose fates we are made to care are introduced in unstable relationships which are then further complicated until the complications are finally resolved by the complete removal of the represented instability" (Fiction and the Shape of Belief, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966, p. 15).

order to produce the appropriate response because our sympathy towards her is primarily a function of her allegiance to an orthodox moral code.

Tom Jones, on the other hand, needs a lengthy introduction in which to develop the reader's sympathetic engagement with the protagonist, because our sympathy for Tom is a product of the artistic construction of the narrative.[24] The fact that this sympathy is not a matter of right morality is evident as early as the criticism of Samuel Johnson, who saw all too well the moral dangers inherent in our affection for Tom. Fielding, in fact, goes out of his way to insist on Tom's deviance from conventional, and by no means unsound, social morality. We are first introduced not to Tom but to the Squire and Miss Bridget Allworthy. Our first impression of Squire Allworthy - an impression which, despite his manifest short-comings, remains firm - is of a simply good man. Furthermore, he is quite the best that the county has to offer, having "an agreeable Person, a sound Constitution, a solid Understanding, and a benevolent Heart" (I, ii; I, p. 34). He had loved, married and buried a beautiful woman, and bore his loss "like a Man of Sense and Constancy" (I, ii; I, p. 35).

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24 In his discussion of the hero in "Thematics", Boris Thomashevsky offers an illuminating examination of the reader's response to the protagonist as a product of the structure of the narrative (in Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, pp. 61 - 95). There are, of course, other factors which determine the nature of Fielding's introduction. He is, for example, writing a history, and histories usually begin at birth. But it should also be noted that Tom is largely absent from the first few books, so the length of the introduction cannot be explained simply by the desire to provide biographical detail.

Whatever we may think of Allworthy's later decisions, and whatever his neighbours may think of his vagaries, our introduction to him places him firmly among those characters whom the reader should admire. In contrast, Bridget Allworthy is introduced as the kind of woman society admires: "as good a Sort of Woman, Madam, as you would wish to know" (I, ii; I, p. 36). She is described entirely by the features of her social facade: her age, marital status, appearance, and prudence. After only two pages of description it is becoming clear that the Squire and Miss Bridget Allworthy represent moral and social norms respectively.

But while Allworthy and Miss Bridget are presented as the objects of our moral and social admiration, Tom is blatantly and unashamedly presented as the object of our compassion. Tom's first introduction to both the reader and Allworthy is as a baby, helpless and endearing, in a "sweet and profound Sleep". Later, with his hand around Allworthy's finger, and "by its gentle Pressure, seeming to implore . . . Assistance" (I, iii; I, p. 41), the claims he makes upon Allworthy are those of sympathetic humanity rather than social or moral duty. It would be interesting to try picturing Master Blifil in a similar situation. If such a feat be attempted, it immediately becomes obvious why Blifil has no infancy and virtually no childhood, arriving on the stage "sober, discreet, and pious beyond his Age" (III, ii; I, p. 118), and capable only of calculated acts.

After his initial appearance, Little Tommy lies dormant for the greater part of two books, mentioned only intermittently as people battle to either augment or disperse Allworthy's affection for him.

It is not until the third book that he again makes a determined appearance, having passed innocently through the background of intrigue that is later to oppress him. "Universal Opinion" now compares Tom unfavourably with Master Blifil, whose "remarkable Disposition" has earned him the regard of everyone who knows him. Tom is still the outcast that he was in the first book when, despite his formal innocence, the general expectation was that he could only grow up to imitate his supposed mother. Now, however, he has lost that formal innocence, having committed three robberies. But Tom Jones, bad as he is, is still the hero of our story. He gained our affection in the initial chapters of Book I, and Fielding saw to it that he gained it against the opposition of the universal opinion that he was born to be hanged. And if there is anything more likely than perfect virtue to secure the sympathy of the reader, it is a conspiratorial allegiance. Little Tommy never held claim to our moral or social admiration; the disapproval of his moral and social standing by family and neighbours merely confirms our amoral, emotional commitment. This is not to say that the allegiance is an easy one to maintain, only that it will take a certain kind of disillusionment to destroy it.

Our sympathy for Tom becomes tied to his "nature", and however much Fielding's critics may disparage what appears to them a simple-minded dependence on something incapable of being isolated, defined, and measured, the very fact that the reader cares for Tom above others, even in the face of a likeable exemplar of what social morality suggests Tom should be (and Fielding deliberately presents a likeable

rather than simply a good benefactor), supports Fielding's conception of a natural goodness. Tom's virtue manifests itself in, and is recognized by, an unconscious inclination rather than considered judgement. His is a natural response to life which inclines him towards making others happy, and thereby finding happiness himself.

It is primarily this type of response that the reader makes when he reads a story well. He becomes involved in the experiences of certain characters, reacting sympathetically to their joys and sorrows. (That readers are very often less innocent than Tom, desiring grief for those with whom there is only antipathy, is a telling judgement on such readers, and one which Fielding himself makes.) Fielding uses much of his long introduction to the main body of the narrative to press home the nature of this response, for it is important not only to the reader's approach to the reading of the story but also to his understanding of its main issue. Tom, for example, is often brought before Squire Allworthy and asked to do things which would give him that fine sense of righteousness that Fielding hangs as a threat over all good people's heads, but which would make him the cause of suffering in others. Our first real knowledge of Tom comes in just such a situation: he refuses to name his accomplice in poaching and is threatened with severe punishment. Yet he is concerned not so much for the consequences to himself as for the punishment awaiting the gamekeeper should his constancy give way under the ordeal. Tom's distress is heightened by the fact that he must bear not only the possibility of physical punishment, but also the consciousness of his own ingratitude towards

Squire Allworthy. He denies himself the comfort of honesty and the consolation of "Fullness of Heart" - both fine moral sentiments - in order to save the gamekeeper from ruin.

These first four books have seen the elaboration of the terms of our involvement with the characters, and also a little gentle testing of the implications of that involvement. Our sympathy for Tom's instinctive humanity is made to contend with the doctrinal claims of benevolent morality in the person of Squire Allworthy, Platonist philosophy in Square, a stern Christian ethic countering natural depravity in Thwackum, and prudential morality in Blifil. Admittedly, most of these alternative responses to life have very limited appeal in their particular manifestations, but Fielding does find occasions on which to demonstrate their latent legitimacy. Blifil's release of Sophia's pet bird is perhaps the most noteworthy, and the most discussed, example.[25]

Blifil's freeing of the bird is one of those few instances in which we see him acting impulsively. As Sophia rightly observed, the act was motivated by anger, yet it is subsequently justified on theoretically sound grounds. Blifil maintains that he released the bird because he "always thought there was something very cruel in

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25 Bernard Harrison in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*: The Novelist as Moral Philosopher (London: Sussex University Press, 1975, pp. 28 - 50) and Robert Alter in Fielding and the Nature of the Novel (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968, pp. 19 - 20) provide two of the most interesting approaches to the episode.

confining any Thing" (IV, iii; I, p. 160). He then goes on to justify his action further by appealing to those values which his masters admire: confining the bird was contrary to the law of nature "by which every Thing hath a Right to Liberty", and it was unchristian, "for it is not doing what we would be done by" (IV, iii; I, p. 160). Then, with a subtly indirect reproach to Sophia, he claims that he would never have released the bird if he had imagined Sophia could be so much concerned. Nor would he have done it, he claims, if he had realized that the nasty hawk was going to carry it off, thus appeasing any pragmatic realist who might be present.

On a superficial level, the case is as clear-cut as Squire Western sees it to be: Blifil deserves to be flogged. Yet if we probe beyond our initial indignation, we find ourselves in something of a quandary. Bilfil's arguments do have a certain theoretical validity, and while he uses them to impose on Allworthy's trusting good-nature, we cannot condemn either Allworthy for his gullibility, or Blifil for his impulsive act of jealousy, without also questioning the validity of both Sophia's respect for Tom's good-natured ingenuousness, and Squire Western's impetuous judgement of Blifil.

These philosophical reservations do not, however, prevent Fielding or the reader from cheering wholeheartedly for Tom in the debate that follows, and while this may seem to be an over-simplification of the issues, the issues are themselves simplified by Tom's own contribution to the episode. On hearing Sophia's screams and discerning their cause, he rushes to her assistance. After a cursory imprecation to

Blifil and without thinking of his own danger, Tom climbs the tree in pursuit of the bird. Tom's quest is unsuccessful, but it does serve to illustrate the distinguishing characteristic of both Tom's good-nature and his impetuosity, that instinctive generosity of feeling and action. As Sophia had observed when she was still very young,

> Tom, though an idle, thoughtless, rattling Rascal, was no-body's Enemy but his own;

whereas

> Master Blifil, though a prudent, discreet, sober young Gentleman, was at the same Time strongly attached to the Interest only of one single Person. (IV, v; I, p. 165.)

It is indicative of Fielding's awareness of the need precisely to define so vulnerable a virtue as Tom's that he bases the movement of the main action of the novel on a conflict between two passionate natures which are to all outward appearances similar. Squire Western has all the vitality and lust for life that Fielding seems to admire in Tom as the external sign of a healthy mind, yet he lacks real sympathy and sensibility for those around him. It is his passionate desire to unite his family with Allworthy's, irrespective of the wishes of the daughter who is to be the agent of unification, that is set in conflict with Tom's passionate desire to marry Sophia, and it is this opposition which provides the impetus for the subsequent course of the action. But for movement to proceed, change must be precipitated in one of the parties. The momentum for this change lies in clearly defined occasions of instability inherent in the nature of the two opposing passions.

Squire Western's passion is the exaggeration of an eminently rational approach to his predicament. He desires his family's aggrandizement and conceives an apparently feasible plan by which it could be achieved. So he becomes passionately attached to that plan. But the initial attachment is a rational one, and if the plan were capable of fulfilment by other means, his passion could likewise shift its attention. Tom's and Sophia's passion, however, has its basis in a patently irrational attraction. On the level of reason they realize that any plans for marriage are not feasible; they are fully aware of the difficulties involved and can see little hope of success. But their love catches them both unawares and they become emotionally trapped in a relationship neither consciously sought. To this degree their attachment is firmly grounded because they are incapable of controlling their passion. Where instability does lie is again in the oblique bearing of rationality on that passion. For if Sophia can be brought to believe that Tom does not love her sincerely, and if Tom can be brought to believe that it is not in Sophia's best interests to be loved by him sincerely, then the relationship may give. The story's development is concerned with the opposition between these two passionate attachments, and the substantiation of the potential for instability inherent in each.

As the novel proceeds we find that it is Squire Western's passion that is consolidated and Tom's and Sophia's emotional relationship that is beginning to crumble. Squire Western gains the support of his more business-like sister and finds Master Blifil an ever more ardent lover. Sophia grows to doubt Tom's sincerity not because of

his immorality as such (for it is to be remembered that Sophia's fondness for Tom and detestation of Blifil is as emotionally based as the reader's: she honoured the one and scorned the other from almost as soon as she knew the difference between the two words), but for his apparent failure to consider her feelings. Finally, Tom becomes more and more certain that he is not promoting Sophia's happiness and is incapable of so doing. Tension mounts as the stage seems set for Squire Western's triumph.

But the development just described is only half the story, or at least half of a good story. By the time the sources of conflict in Tom Jones have been outlined, the reader has in effect made a choice in favour of Tom. For the story to continue, allowing Squire Western to rage and Tom to hang, would be to renounce the reader's commitment to Tom and to subvert the story's allegiance to a truth or logic responsible to emotional, and in its highest form, specifically humane requirements. Stories confer certain rights on their characters, the most important of these rights being that fair treatment will be determined by compassion rather than impartial rectitude, or the pragmatic rationalism of the real world. If a character has earned our sympathy, the story-teller will seek a resolution in keeping with that sympathy. Accordingly, Fielding will endeavour to "bring our Favourites out of their present Anguish and Distress, and to land them at last on the Shore of Happiness"

(XVII, i; II, p. 875), however hard a task it may seem.[25]

Yet, despite the fact that Fielding has founded the weakening of Tom's and Sophia's passion on a misunderstanding that retains the possibility of rectification, rather than on irretrievable wrongs, there are still those who think that Fielding's climactic bestowal of happiness on his principals is demanding more of the intelligent reader's indulgence than should reasonably be asked. That Tom gains Sophia's assent to marriage only after he has reached the ultimate depths of misery and before he has shown positive proof of the possession of that prudence which should, in this world, allow him to achieve the deserts of which he is worthy, seems to be courting the reader's "critical Infidelity". But it is plots that must be believable, not stories. Stories have their own special kind of logic based on felt consistencies, and in order to appreciate them the reader must only assent to the conviction that felt consistencies matter. As John Fowles comments when, in one of his

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25 A resolution in keeping with our sympathy for the principal characters does not necessarily mean a "happy ending" in the sense of bestowing felicity on all concerned. Fielding is writing a "comic epic" and landing his "Favourites on the Shore of Happiness" is an essential ingredient of that comedy. But it is not the happiness that is essential to the comedy, any more than it is sadness that is essential to tragedy. Fielding himself ridicules those writers who think that tragedy amounts to bringing the principal characters to the "Pitch of human Misery" (XVII, i; II, p. 875) and leaving them there. In tragedy our sympathies demand that the protagonist achieve human dignity through suffering, a suffering that is usually caused by his desire to be more than simply human. In comedy, the happy ending, when bestowed, is usually achieved at the expense of this dignity, but is nevertheless rewarding in its celebration of the less exalted of human qualities.

short stories, a child is drawn hesitantly into the tale she is being told: "One does not have to believe stories; only that they can be told".[26]

The point of telling a story such as we find in Tom Jones is that the issue about which we are made to care (in this case the rightness of the love of Tom for Sophia) is first put in doubt and then proved true. Proving it true to the fullest possible extent is done not by intellectual persuasion but by the development of a compelling opposition, preferably one which almost succeeds in asserting itself. In Tom Jones this opposition is provided by the plot. The conflict with Squire Western initiated the breakdown of Tom's and Sophia's relationship but the real tension arises from the plot developments which reveal the consequences of Tom's wildness, wantonness and lack of caution. The reader is forced to weigh the value of a person who, "though he did not always act rightly, yet he never did otherwise without feeling and suffering for it" (IV, vi; I, p. 173), against the social and moral dangers which are the issue of that person's behaviour. If our sympathy for Tom can survive his very real shortcomings, then the logic of the story demands that both Tom and the reader should find satisfaction.

The happy ending of Tom Jones is gratuitous only if the reader has embraced Tom to such an extent that he is oblivious to all demands on his responsiveness other than his sympathetic involvement.

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26 John Fowles, "The Cloud", in The Ebony Tower (1974; rpt. St Albans, Herts: Panther Books, 1975), p. 282.

If the opposition has had clear access to his reason but has still not produced evidence enough to prove his hero unworthy of his sympathy, then the resolution has been found true in the sense that it has been emotionally earned. If the reader has read well, he will know that the world is all the better, though a lot less tranquil, for having people such as Tom in it.

With so many "ifs" abounding, it is as well that Fielding takes care to ensure that the reader has every chance to become the reader he should be. Because the novel depends upon the interplay of personalized experience in the story and rational observation in the plot, the reader must be capable of sensitive adjustments between the roles of participant and spectator. He must be able to respond with the characters and events as well as to them. The author can count on some of his readers bringing with them certain of those native powers of sympathy which will attach them to humanly recognizable people in humanly recognizable situations. Similarly, he should be able to count on some of those powers of observation and discrimination that will enable the reader to stand back and see those same characters and events in the clear light of reason. But the author can also count on some readers having the purely rational preoccupations of a Mr Blifil or the passionate proclivity of a Squire Western. As a good novelist he must be able to control these tendencies in order to fire the creative imagination of those whose emotions have been dulled, and to prick the consciousness of those whose better judgements have been swamped. Subsequent novelists have not always found it necessary to employ a tangible authorial presence in their novels in

order to define the good reader's range of response, but neither have they always been able to effect this definition while still allowing the reader to preserve his own essential integrity.

CHAPTER 7

Tom Jones and Amelia: The Art of Reading and "the ART of LIFE"

Since, "Reader, it is impossible we should know what Sort of Person thou wilt be" (Tom Jones, X, i; II, p. 523). Fielding finds it necessary to define from the beginning of Tom Jones not simply the relationship between himself and the reader, but also the role of the reader and, more specifically, the nature of the good reader's responses. It is important to draw this distinction between the relationship which is formed and the purpose to which it is put, because the obvious fact of Fielding's presence in Tom Jones does tend to cloud an awareness of the actual function of that presence. Fielding's apprehensiveness about what the reader might be up to, and his consequently broody supervision of his novel as it makes its way in the world, have led at least one critic to suggest that the author is the most important "character" in the novel and that the comprehensive interaction of author and reader amounts almost to a sub-plot.[1] But a more disturbing conclusion drawn from Fielding's insistent authorial voice is that asserted by Ian Watt in The Rise of the Novel. Watt maintains that the main critical doubt which

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1 Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 215 - 218.

Tom Jones suggests arises from its failure to render its truth in terms of the novel, adding that

> if we analyse our impression from the novels alone it surely is evident that our residual impression of dignity and generosity comes mainly from the passages where Fielding is speaking in his own person.[2]

Fielding's adoption of a palpable narrator certainly has the effect of investing Tom Jones with an interest which is independent of the narrative proper: his amiably tolerant tone and carefully modulated style superimpose on the action an engagingly well-balanced judgemental norm, and his intimate re-creation of the difficulties involved in fathering a novel makes him an object of admiration and respect. Moreover, if we take into account the evidence of Amelia, a novel in which the master's voice is largely absent, and which is also considerably less successful than Tom Jones, we find what would appear to be additional support for Ian Watt's contention that basically non-novelistic practices are the source of Fielding's achievement in Tom Jones.

The evidence of Amelia, however, is less clear-cut and more circumstantial than it at first appears, because the withdrawal of the author and his aura from the novel is indicative of a far more profound change of manner, or to be more accurate, change of heart on the part of Fielding. The decision to let events speak for themselves meant not simply that he would decline to make the telling

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2 The Rise of the Novel, p. 299.

of the story a personal performance, but that the story itself would diminish in importance in relation to plot. The design of Amelia, like that of Tom Jones, is to promote virtue by exposing evil. In Tom Jones, however, this is achieved by revealing the evil consequences of vices in our favourite characters, so that

> we are not only taught to shun them for our own sake, but to hate them for the Mischiefs they have already brought on those we love. (X, i; II, p. 527.)

In Amelia, on the other hand, the appeal is made directly to our reason, as Fielding endeavours to account

> by natural means . . . for the success of knaves, the calamities of fools, with all the miseries in which men of sense sometimes involve themselves, by quitting the directions of prudence, and following the blind guidance of a predominant passion.[3]

In this novel Fielding argues that by focusing directly upon the action, and

> by observing minutely the several incidents which tend to the catastrophe or completion of the whole, and the minute causes whence those incidents are produced, we shall best be instructed in this most useful of all arts, which I call the ART of LIFE. (I, i; I, p. 4.)

Fielding's major concern in Tom Jones is not with the art of life but rather with the art of the novel, or more specifically, with the art of reading novels. Although Ian Watt was right when he observed that much of what we get out of Tom Jones in the way of ideas

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3 Henry Fielding, Amelia, 2 vols. (London: Dent, 1962), I, i (I, p. 3). Further citations will be made parenthetically, with book and chapter references preceding volume and page number relevant to this edition.

and values cannot be explained simply in terms of rendered action, processed and interpreted, it does not necessarily follow that the value of Fielding's work lies in interests which are only incidental to the novel as a narrative form. The art of his novel depends upon the fact that a narrative implies a narrator and an audience, with the significance of the narrative resting in the way in which it is told and the way in which the audience responds to it. In telling his story, Fielding certainly makes himself fine company, but that conviction of dignity and generosity pervading his novel is not simply the result of either the author's own voice or the air he casts upon the proceedings. He works instead so that it becomes part of the reader's personal experience in responding to the novel.

Fielding makes his precise function clear in the extended analogy of the author's role with that of the keeper of a public ordinary in the first book of Tom Jones. Two characteristics of the keeper's task are particularly relevant to Fielding's authorial duties. First of all, the keeper has an obligation to his clientele to serve provisions that will satisfy all tastes, and to serve them in a manner that "provokes and incites the most languid Appetite" (I, i; I, p. 33). Thus Fielding, as the good host, offers his readers a plentiful supply of Human Nature of prodigious variety, all artfully combined to effect a pleasing contrast between the plain and the highly spiced. At this stage in the proceedings the second attribute of the good inn-keeper should come into operation. Since the host's presence is required for the preparation and presentation of his meal, it becomes him to make that presence rewarding to the consumer. Hence Fielding serves

his fare in a congenial and informative manner, taking advantage of the unavoidable conjunction of teller with tale to make his companionship a profitable one. But that should be the extent of the relationship between host and consumer. Like the master of the ordinary, the novelist is not required to exercise his Genius on behalf of his guests. Certainly, he is expected to be possessed of Genius, to employ it in the preparation and presentation of his fare so that his dishes are offered in such succession and association that the public is prompted to exercise its own sensibilities, its own powers of discrimination and judgement. But it is the public alone that is required to taste and judge, and Fielding no more expects the author to make his reader's observations for him than he does the inn-keeper to savour his guests' food for them. As Fielding takes some delight in telling the reader,

> thou art highly mistaken if thou dost imagine that we intended, when we began this great Work, to leave thy Sagacity nothing to do, or that without sometimes exercising this Talent, thou wilt be able to travel through our Pages with any Pleasure or Profit to thyself.
> (IX, ix; II, p. 614.)

Early in Tom Jones, and again in A Voyage to Lisbon, Fielding pursues further the right of the reader to his own observations, offering a declaration of intent which, in the light of his usual practice of providing unsparing commentary on the action, might at first appear damning. In Book I of Tom Jones he remarks,

> As this is one of those deep Observations which very few Readers can be supposed capable of making themselves, I have thought proper to lend them my Assistance; but this is a Favour rarely to be expected in the Course of my Work.

> Indeed I shall seldom or never so indulge him, unless in such Instances as this, where nothing but the Inspiration with which we Writers are gifted, can possibly enable any one to make the Discovery. (I, v; I, p. 47.)

And again, and less teasingly, in A Voyage to Lisbon he declares,

> As there are very few things which a traveller is to record, there are fewer on which he is to offer observations: this is the office of the reader; and it is so pleasant a one, that he seldom chooses to have it taken from him, under the pretence of lending him assistance. Some occasions, indeed, there are, when proper observations are pertinent, and others when they are necessary; but good sense alone must point them out. I shall lay down only one general rule; which I believe to be the universal truth between relator and hearer, as it is between author and reader; that is that the latter never forgive any observation of the former which does not convey some knowledge they are sensible they could not possibly have attained themselves.[4]

Now, in Tom Jones Fielding does make rather more observations than would appear authorized by these statements. Seldom a page goes by without some form of authorial observation, most of which we would be pressed to describe as accessible exclusively to the author. Taking at random, for example, page 427 (VIII, vii) - a quite ordinary page, dealing with Partridge's decision to join Tom - we find a lengthy account of Partridge's "real" motives, a nice allusion to learning, a further account of Tom's acceptance of Partridge's assertions, and two observations on the general character of mankind, the first dealing with man's tendency to ascribe impure motives even when purer ones are available and asserted, and the second on the absence in Tom of a modicum of prudence, followed by

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4 Henry Fielding, Jonathan Wild and The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1964), p. 184.

some general comments on the different ways prudence can be acquired.

Neither of these last observations would seem to fit Fielding's stated requirements. Yet, if we look at them more closely (which, after all, Fielding continually warns us we should do), we find that they are not, strictly speaking, observations at all. They do not sum up a truth evident in the preceding action, nor do they really offer a viewpoint from which these actions might be judged. Both contain a degree of irony which should prompt the reader to make a further, modified, observation for himself.

The first of these comments follows Partridge's reasoning that Allworthy's benefaction to him was "by way of Atonement for Injustice" rather than pure charity. The comment runs:

> . . . it is very uncommon, I believe, for Men to ascribe the Benefactions they receive to pure Charity, when they can possibly impute them to any other Motive. (VIII, vii; I, p. 427.)

Two aspects of this statement create a sense of disquiet that should be foreign to a carefully formulated observation. First, the reader himself is in the same ignorant state as Partridge in regard to Tom's conception and very likely has been tempted to ascribe a similar motivation to Allworthy; and secondly, Fielding's observation is a judgement which itself can be seen as an instance of the general tendency he seems to be censuring.

Fielding then goes on to describe one of those uncommon occasions when man does not ascribe an impure motive, and where the failure to do so results in an error of judgement. Tom, after chastising Partridge's questioning of Allworthy's motives, himself accepts unquestioningly the vaunted selflessness of Partridge's desire

to accompany him. Fielding immediately condemns this "blameable Want of Caution, and Diffidence in the Veracity of others" as an example of Tom's lack of prudence, and goes on to explore the differing virtues of a prudence acquired from nature and a prudence developed through experience. Fielding opts for the infallibility and conclusiveness of natural prudence, observing that man "must have very little Understanding indeed, if he ever renders himself liable to be once deceived". Even if the reader has managed to survive the incongruity between the admirable innocence of Tom in believing that "Partridge had no other Inducements but Love to him, and Zeal for the Cause" and the quite uncompromised nature of the censure, he surely cannot escape noticing either the moral limitations of people who can never be deceived, or the defects of a system which condemns a man for hoping yet to find someone worthy of trust.

This particular kind of observation is typical of Fielding's manner: he is not operating as the intrusive narrator in order to impose upon the reader's judgement; rather he is intruding in order to force the reader to judge. There are, of course, times when he makes observations with which the reader feels he is being called upon to agree. Later in the novel, for example, Fielding states explicitly what he is leading the reader to recognize in the case quoted above. In chapter ten of Book XI, "Containing a Hint or two concerning Virtue, and a few more concerning Suspicion", Fielding unambiguously declares the fallibility of natural prudence, that "vast Quicksightedness into Evil" from which has arisen "many sad Mischiefs and most grievous Heart-akes to Innocence and Virtue" (XI, x; II, p. 615). But it should

be noted that this observation is made in the context of less unambiguous observations on Mrs Fitzpatrick's virtue, with both kinds of observation fraternizing in a chapter whose heading encourages no such niceties of discrimination. The reader is offered an observation, but it is offered in such a context that the reader must make his own decision whether to accept it, or whether, indeed, it is an observation as such.

Fielding's procedure in Tom Jones is to present a series of actions involving characters in whom the reader has a certain interest, and to describe them from a deliberately distanced and balanced viewpoint. He talks about those actions, about motives which may have caused them, about possible consequences, about their relation to the past and future lives of the characters. And he does all this in the spirit of a good companion: he wants the reader in a circumspect frame of mind so that he will be inclined to use his eyes; he wants to keep the reader aware of possibilities and choices so that he will exercise his discrimination; and he wants to force the reader into situations (such as Blifil's release of Sophia's pet bird, or Tom's ready acceptance of second-best when first-best is unavailable) that require him to make judgements in spite of himself. The balance and circumspection of the authorial voice cannot be written off, as Ian Watt attempts to do, by recourse to a theory of insatiable authorial garrulity.[5] It is present not simply because it expresses the character of Fielding the man but because it reflects the desire

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5 The Rise of the Novel, p. 298.

of Fielding the author to create in the reader an answering frame of mind.

Under the pressure of this constant insistence on the need for reason and judgement, the reader may be forgiven for suspecting that he is having just as much prudence thrust upon him as upon Tom. But while Fielding is asking us to stand back and judge the frailties of man, he is at the same time developing his story so that the reader is drawn compellingly into the action and, in the process, into the exercise of that sympathetic faculty which is less congenial to the dictates of reason.

A scene from Joseph Andrews may serve to illustrate the potential both for interaction and mutual qualification in the two kinds of response and, more specifically, the influence of narrative values in determining the human validity of intellectual truths. At the end of chapter nine of Book III, Joseph and Parson Adams are left bound back-to-back to a bed-post after the captain has abducted Fanny. In chapter ten there follows a "diverting" dialogue between the Poet and the Player, two pompous playthings of the malicious squire who has designs on Fanny. In the pettiness of their whinings they inadvertently exemplify the truth behind their histrionics as they toy with Otway's disdain,

"Who'd be that foolish, sordid thing, call'd man?"

The Poet and Player dialogue encapsulates the sorry picture of man that has been growing throughout the novel: the strong and virtuous have been proved helpless; ideals have been found to be broken by even the most exemplary of men; man's natural inclincations have been

revealed, in the cautionary tale of Mr Wilson, to be the cultivators of disease and death; and man's artists have been shown to be egotistical toys. But following this dialogue, and as "a sort of counterpart" to it, is the chapter containing "the exhortations of Parson Adams to his friend in affliction, calculated for the instruction and improvement of the reader". Adams counsels Joseph to submit to Divine Providence and to forbear grieving over an evil which may be designed to produce good. Joseph, however, is unable to find consolation in Adams's sound advice and amidst groans and sighs bursts out with:

> "Yes, I will bear my sorrows like a man,
> But I must also feel them as a man."

These two chapters are, like Joseph and Adams, tied back-to-back as the movement of the narrative is halted for a moment in order to contemplate the truths evident in the two positions. Man on his own, without the submissive relationship with God that Adams is advocating, is seen in the Poet and the Player dialogue to be an insignificant, purposeless creature. As an alternative, Adams offers an ideal of Christian conduct, an ideal which Joseph, as a Christian, has every obligation to live up to. No Christian should treasure a worldly object more than his duty towards his Lord - or, as Adams elsewhere declares,

> no Christian ought so to set his heart on any person or thing in this world, but that, whenever it shall be required or taken from him in any manner by Divine Providence, he may be able, peacably, quietly, and contentedly, to resign it. (IV, viii; p. 265.)

It is a simple tenet, the observance of which would make us all better Christians. Yet to trust completely in the providential will of God is a cold-blooded response to life, a response which, whatever theoretical approbation it might receive, is in practice distasteful. Joseph's heartfelt cry may be a little too consciously dramatic, but the point needs to be made.

We are left, then, with two chapters locked together in an antithesis which seems to be getting the reader nowhere, until, that is, we realize that the uneasiness we feel at the obstruction of the story is reinforcing Joseph's assertion that he must feel as a man. The reader is made to feel, like Joseph, anxiety for things remembered as dear; he too is human, and Fielding acknowledges that the reader cannot be expected willingly to forgo the characteristically human need to know "what happened to that beautiful and innocent virgin, after she fell into the wicked hands of the captain" (III, xii, p. 227). While Parson Adams's advice to Joseph is equally relevant to the reader (the providential design of the author and the reader's ignorance of what is to come must render anxiety inappropriate), Fielding is forced to admit that

> Neither the facetious dialogue which passed between the poet and the player, nor the grave and truly solemn discourse of Mr. Adams, will, we conceive, make the reader sufficient amends for the anxiety which he must have felt on the account of poor Fanny, whom we left in so deplorable a condition. (III, xii, pp. 226 - 227.)

Our sympathy for Joseph's plight and our anxiety over Fanny do not seriously challenge the ultimate validity of Parson Adams's exhortation to faith. Nor does Adams's own lapse into unbounded grief

at the news of the drowning of his favourite son mean that he is less than sincere in his belief in Divine Providence. These incidents do indicate, however, that what is true in an ultimate sense is never simply true in a human sense. We may ridicule Adams's failure to live up to an ideal, but we will also sympathize with the distinctly human virtue of which this failure is expressive.

In Joseph Andrews, the awareness of man's mere humanity, growing out of the accumulating complications of the plot, is qualified, through the development of the story, by a sympathetic readiness of response which rejoices in that humanity. In Tom Jones, while the plot expounds a different view of man's relationship with the universe, emphasizing not his limitations but his potential for positive interaction through the exercise of his reason and judgement, the story has a similar modifying function. Man may approach magnificence in his capacity for rational determination, but he needs a compassion derived from personal involvement in the experience of others to be handsomely human. If the reader, like the novelist, has "a good Heart" and is "capable of feeling",[6] then that final impression of dignity and generosity to which Ian Watt refers is as much the product of the reader's response to the novel as it is of Fielding's authorial voice. For what is dignity if it is not in the reader's celebration of a Tom Jones, an ordinary man yet one who does "great Honour to

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6 At the end of a lengthy summary of those qualities necessary in a writer of such histories as his, Fielding asserts: "Nor will all the Qualities I have hitherto given my Historian avail him, unless he have what is generally meant by a good Heart, and be capable of feeling" (IX, i; I, p. 494).

Human Nature, and is productive of the highest Good to Society" (IV, v; I, p. 166), and what is generosity if it is not in the reader's satisfaction with an ending in which the hero is loved none the less for his very real shortcomings, where Squire Western is allowed his happiness despite the havoc he has wrought, and where revenge is neither sought nor enacted on those who have caused the complications and distress.

Despite his formidable presence in Tom Jones, Fielding neither becomes the most important character in the novel nor usurps the reader's imaginative prerogatives. The relationship he forms with his audience is designed not to make reading easier but to make a better reader, one capable of meeting the demands of a narrative form which requires both discriminating judgement and personal involvement. In Amelia, however, Fielding denies us not only the pleasure of that relationship but also the profit. The air of mellowness and geniality that was so comforting in Tom Jones has disappeared, to be replaced by an often grating irascibility. But more unsettling is the replacement of the editorial "we", which in Tom Jones seemed to stand as an open invitation to the reader to share in Fielding's magnanimity, with the stridency of a moralizing "I".

The change in tone from Tom Jones to Amelia is understandable if we consider the difference in subject-matter between the two novels. In Tom Jones Fielding emphasizes that his main concern is with folly, not vice, and with good-nature rather than perfect virtue. Amelia, on the other hand, is dedicated "to the exposure of the most glaring evils,

as well public as private" (Dedication; I, p. xv). One could hardly call the noble lord's thorough-going traffic in desirable women a folly (especially when it is compared with Lady Bellaston's casual though ardent liaisons) and Booth's recklessness approximates vice both in its consequences and in the congenital weakness it reflects. (Tom's recklessness, on the other hand, is seen as an imprudent side-effect of a positive virtue.) Furthermore, the alarming mortality rate among the villainous and heedless is an indication of the more serious implications inherent in the recognition of an active evil.

Fielding's approach to this nefarious world is determinedly ironic, and the churlish "I" is an effective means of maintaining both distance and equanimity. Our initial meeting with Booth and the society in which he fares so badly, for example, is presented with a nicety of ironic touch seldom equalled elsewhere in Fielding's work. What begins for Booth as a natural response to the injustice of an unequal fight leads to the sophisticated nuances of Justice Thrasher's equity and the inexorable law of the jungle in what is supposed to be society's civilizing institutions, the house of correction. And just as inevitable as society's law and order realizing itself in a gathering moral anarchy is the extra-marital liaison which develops as Booth recounts his courtship of, and devotion, to Amelia. Fielding offers no real excuse for Booth's acceptance of Miss Matthews's advances observing only that Miss Matthews was a fine young woman and Mr Booth a "young fellow in the highest vigour of life" (IV, ii; I, p. 161), that it was late at night, that Miss Matthews was more hospitable than the prison, and that, most important of all, they were alone together. The

incongruity of Booth's very real love for Amelia and his very easily shaken fidelity is not diluted by reasons and explanations; Fielding's "defence" describes rather than explains the events.

Complementing the studied coolness of Fielding's observations is an ambivalence which is built into the structure of the narrative. The past history of Booth and Amelia is related in a context which is not exactly conducive to the formation of a definitive evaluation. The injustices done to Booth in the past and the injustice leading to his present imprisonment must be set against the injustice he is about to do to Amelia, making it difficult for the reader to take a clear stand towards the characters, yet the invidious complacency of both Booth and society in general makes it clear that some kind of stand is necessary.

In Amelia Fielding has a hard lesson to teach, and it must be admitted that he does not make the lesson any more agreeable to the reader by abandoning his former congenial presence. But while the change in narratorial method may explain some of the disappointment which readers experience on coming to Amelia after Fielding's earlier novels, it does little to explain the more deep-seated dissatisfaction which has been evident in readers and critics since its first publication. The dispassionate "I" and the structured ambivalence of the narration are both felicitous vehicles of a complex moral argument which is elucidated - in a manner of which Ian Watt would approve - within the action of the novel. Yet for all this, Amelia is generally considered to be a failure, and something more than

a "relative failure"[7] if we may judge by the plethora of reasons offered by critics to account for their dissatisfaction.[8]

Douglas Hewitt has observed that

> It is a characteristic of the discussion of fiction that we only mention - or even take into account - some of its most fundamental qualities if something goes wrong.[9]

In Amelia things do go wrong, specifically with that fundamental attribute of the novelist as a story-teller which I have been arguing should be taken into account in any critical study. Despite passing remarks he still makes in Amelia in reference to the power of the good heart over the best of heads,[10] by the time Fielding came to write this novel he seems to have decided that good hearts are too rare to make such an appeal profitable, and so devotes his time to the head. He constructs a plot on the basis of those "minute causes whence . . .

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7 George Sherburn, "Fielding's Amelia: An Interpretation", ELH, III (1936), p. 1.

8 Sheridan Baker in "Fielding's Amelia and the Materials of Romance", Philological Quarterly, XLV (1962), 437 - 449, argues that its failure lies in the absence of comedy as a mediator between the realistic and the romantic; A. J. Hassall argues that its failure can be attributed to uncertainty on the basic structural level of narrative method, in "Fielding's Amelia: Dramatic and Authorial Narration", Novel, V (1972), 225 - 233; Robert Alter argues that there is a disconcerting sense that the tone of the novel is not always fully under the writer's control in Fielding and the Nature of the Novel, (Harvard Univ. Press, 1968); and Eustace Palmer argues that it seems more didactic and less interesting because of its artistic flaws and the inadequacy of its demonstration of its moral points in "Amelia: The Decline of Fielding's Art", Essays in Criticism, XXI (1971), 135 - 151.

9 The Approach to Fiction, p. 191.

10 for example, II, ii (I, p. 60); IX, iv (II, p. 129); X, ix (II, p. 214).

incidents are produced", and as a plot it works admirably. But in concentrating on the head, Fielding neglects the emotional demands of the story and, in the process, specifically novelistic methods of persuasion.

The chief target of the plot in Amelia is Fortune, to whom "the public voice hath, in all ages, done much injustice . . . and hath convicted . . . of many facts in which she had not the least concern" (I, i; I, p. 3). At various points throughout the novel Fielding goes to the trouble of suggesting natural causes for apparently "fortunate" incidents. Booth's fortune at the gaming table, for example, is controlled not by caprice but by the fraud of the other experienced gamblers, and his fortune as a soldier owes less to fate than it does to the self-interest of a few unscrupulous superiors. In Amelia Fielding wants to show why fools suffer and knaves prosper and, more importantly, why virtue goes unrecognized; and in order to do this he must first convince the reader that an appeal to the vagaries of Fortune avoids rather than answers the questions.

The whole business of Fortune and its ultimate inconsequentiality is summed up in the affair of the "fortune" or inheritance which Amelia fails to receive from her mother. When Betty Harris writes to her sister:

> "You are to make the best of your fortune--
> what fortune, I mean, my mamma may please to
> give you, for you know all is in her power"
> (III, vii; I, pp. 122 - 123),

she is, in effect, outlining the terms of battle. By turning the popular uses of a word back upon the users, and equating Fortune in

its broadest sense with fortune as the goods of inheritance, Fielding neatly puts this piece of barbarism in its place. The world would first have us believe that Fortune can only be measured in terms of the world's values, and then infers that the world's values are the only ones that matter since it is on them that the ruling body - that is, Fortune - focuses its attention. Fielding, on the other hand, is asserting that Fortune in the sense of well-being can be independent of material values, and that the ultimate values are those of the other world. As Booth and Amelia make their way through the novel, with Dr Harrison pulling them towards the values of the next world, and a succession of worldly-interested characters imposing on them the values of this world, they discover is that what the world looks up to as Fortune is understandable simply as the "natural means" by which knaves work upon the foolish and innocent, and what the world regards as valuable (that is, the consequences of this Fortune) is neither necessary to well-being in this world nor relevant to peace in the next. Fortune can be conquered by hard work, prudence, and spiritual awareness, but first Booth must be made to recognize that events do not just occur; men cause them to happen and therefore men must take responsibility for their actions.

The plot of Amelia, with its attention to causal sequence, is thus an expeditious vehicle of the novel's theme. It works, indeed, better than most critics give it credit for. What many regard as a weak-minded acquiescence in providing the obligatory happy ending is in fact a logical consequence of the development of semantic

ironies inherent in the synonymous use of terms for both worldly and spiritual values. In Amelia Fielding has exercised with perspicuity and acuteness his considerable intellect, and he expects the reader to respond in kind. He asks us to listen to the argument of reason and not that of impulse, the argument of intellect rather than empathy, and the argument of the world of essences rather than the world of temporality.

The trouble with adopting this kind of strategy in the context of the novel is that the forms of argument abandoned retain a compulsion for the reader which tends to interfere with the effectiveness of the alternative offered. As Malcolm Cowley observes, the temporal pull of event upon event will move the reader more than the conceptual organization of event in relation to idea.[11] The immediate task, therefore, of any novelist who decides to dwell upon essences or the values of the other world is to set up a dialectic which will negotiate between these ideas or values and the pressing realities of the world in the novel's medium of time. Fielding does attempt this connection through the use of hope and fear, emotions raised as a consequence of events in the temporal world, but acting upon and for the other world. Unfortunately, neither of these passions plays a very important part in our experience of the novel, first because they fare ill in partnership with the emphasis on reason and the intellect, and secondly because this same emphasis effectively precludes the development of the kind of sympathetic

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11 Malcolm Cowley, "Story-telling's Tarnished Image", Saturday Review, 25 September 1971, pp. 25 - 27.

involvement which is necessary before such affective expectations can be roused.

Dr Harrison's last major pronouncement on the affairs of the novel seems just about to summarize Fielding's tactics in writing Amelia:

> . . . if men act, as I believe they do, from their passions, it would be fair to conclude that religion to be true which applies immediately to the strongest of these passions, hope and fear; choosing rather to rely on its rewards and punishments than on that native beauty of virtue which some of the ancient philosophers thought proper to recommend to their disciples. (XII, v; II, p. 288.)

In the action of the novel Fielding similarly acknowledges man's propensity to be directed by his passions, focusing his argument of reason on the demolition of the false hopes and fears to which knaves and fools cling and redirecting these passions towards heavenly rewards and punishments. The positive effects of this redirection are, however, often doubtful. It is difficult, for example, to pin-point the exact stand Fielding is taking when he has Dr Harrison write to Amelia and Booth, informing them of the death of Amelia's mother and the contents of her will.[12] From the lengthy precursor to the basic information that

> "Your good mother . . . is dead at last, and hath left her whole fortune to her elder daughter" (III, x; I, p. 142),

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12 Fielding, for example, describes this letter as "of a very curious kind" (p. 139), and follows its reading with a discussion of its contents, which Miss Matthews divides into "pretty things to read" and "serious matter" (p. 142), and which Booth admires for the "easy, generous, friendly manner in which [Dr Harrison] sent . . . the hundred pounds" (p. 143).

one can appreciate the good doctor's priorities, but in the process of reading the letter, knowledge of these priorities does little to allay the fears of the ill news which is to come. Furthermore, Dr Harrisons's preface on heavenly rewards, like Parson Adams's advice to Joseph that he should trust in Divine Providence, actually has the effect of increasing the pressure of worldly demands.

In the context of the meeting between Booth and Miss Matthews in which the letter is read, with its presentation concentrating on the subtleties of nuance and the ambiguities of personal contact, the uncertainties posed by Dr Harrison's prose are allowed to ride. Fielding is, after all, writing a comic novel, and his concerns are not confined to elucidating a doctrine. On other occasions Dr Harrison's argument appears sound and wholly to be supported. His discussions with the young clergyman, the nobleman, and finally with Booth at the end are presented with a conviction and reasonableness which preclude dissent. Yet it should be noted that these three examples are all instances of Dr Harrison arguing for his philosophy as a general principle rather than as an answer to a specific problem. When he offers the same philosophy to persons in distress, as in the case with the letter referred to above, or later when Amelia is anxious for Booth's honour, or again when she fears separation from her husband, the sentiment appears inadequate to the demands upon the emotions. Whatever the ultimate truth of the situation might be, in the immediate consideration his argument is made irrelevant by the novel's inescapable emphasis on the worldly dimension. The same limitations apply to the influence of heavenly punishments on worldly

actions, an acknowledgement Fielding himself seems to be making when he renders Caesar's justice upon the wicked in the last few pages.

Fielding's use of hope and fear as an element of the narrative structure suffers from similar inadequacies. It is the alternation of these two emotions in both characters and reader which provides the basis of the narrative structure. Concern for the consequences of Booth's foolishness and Amelia's defencelessness is set against confidence in the real merit of Booth and the ultimate impregnability of Amelia's virtue. The forward impetus of the novel depends upon the establishment of an unstable and threatening situation caused either by Booth's foolishness (for example, his easy seduction by Miss Matthews), or by Amelia's innocence (for example, her failure to suspect evil intentions behind apparently benevolent actions), followed at length by a resolution based upon the recognition of Booth's merit (for example, Amelia's dismissal of the affair, confident that Booth would not be guilty of premeditated inconstancy) or Amelia's virtue (for example, Mrs Bennet's decision to risk her reputation in order to protect someone she acknowledges to be more virtuous than herself). Each resolution is the occasion for hope of a wider recognition of the value of this couple, a hope which lasts only as long as the next attempt to achieve this recognition.

This constant alternation of hope and fear disguises the absence of any real goal on which to focus the movement of the novel. Booth and Amelia really have nowhere of significance to go in the novel, since their goals should be other-worldly. The aim of the book is largely spiritual - the development of an awareness of virtue - and

it is achieved in a manner which cannot be expressed in terms of the events of the novel. In fact Booth's conversion is so presented that it happens literally outside the novel. For the reader to have knowledge of this essential experience he must himself go to the book which occasioned it. An interesting evangelical strategy, perhaps, but it is hardly designed to move the reader in the process of reading the novel. Either Fielding's inability to express profound spiritual feeling, or his belief that the novel is not the place to do it, prevented him from achieving a climax that rises legitimately from the rhythm of the preceding action and emotion. The effect of Booth's off-stage conversion, combined with the necessarily casual presentation of the Booths' material success, produces a dissatisfaction which makes the subsequent vision of domestic tranquility gratuitous rather than reassuring.

The rhythmic alternation of hope and fear has been steadily building up a momentum which creates the expectation of one or other of these emotions finally asserting itself at the height of its swing. Our concern for the desperate and apparently hopeless situation into which Booth at last gets himself should reach the point where either this movement must find fulfilment and establish itself or else be overcome by the triumphant assertion of virtue and innocence. What happens instead is that the energy which maintains the rhythm is withdrawn: by establishing worldly security upon the worthy couple, Fielding removes the necessity of showing the viability of virtue as a means of existence. There is no need to resolve the tension between our hope and fear because both emotions become irrelevant as Booth

and Amelia dwindle into serenity.

The absence in the novel of a goal which is of narrative significance would not be so damaging were it not for Fielding's general inattention to non-intellectual concerns. Although there is an intellectually gratifying pleasure involved in contemplating the moral complexities of the plot and its investigation of the worldly reality of Christian principles, there is little to sustain an affective interest. The disequilibrium between social and Christian values which instigates the plot produces no corresponding feeling of personal uneasiness in the reader, nor does the development of the conflict produce the kind of physical tension which makes you want to read Tom Jones faster than you know you should. The inability of the reader's response to go much further than the cognitive appreciation of the plot mechanisms has its origins in Fielding's failure to offer the reader access to his characters and events by means of sympathetic involvement.

Fielding's decision to confront us with Booth without a formal introduction is dramatically profitable, because his initial neutrality plays an important part in the presentation of the conflict which is to control the development of the novel. In the course of the first book we begin to learn a little about him, of his inconsiderable share of philosophy, his disadvantageous opinion of Providence, his belief in the dominating influence of the uppermost passion, the fleeting quality of his sympathy for people in distress, and his innocent and unsuspecting nature. But it is information gained at a distance and drained of personal commitment. The matter of response is further

complicated by Booth's characteristic attitude of passive acceptance towards life. Because he believes that man's actions have no moral quality, Booth can find no personal realization in the things he does. The reader can understand the way Booth thinks, can recognize the causes of his actions, but he cannot involve himself in Booth's experience because, as presented, that experience is so remote from Booth himself.

The sense of isolation from Booth extends into our relationship with Amelia. We meet her first in Booth's account of his life to Miss Matthews, and our initial response to her cannot but be affected by our inability to appreciate what we ourselves cannot feel - her attraction to Booth - and by the failure of the couple's relationship to have a guiding effect upon the actions of Booth. We do eventually come closer to Amelia than we do to Booth because her conscious personal conviction makes everything she does an expression of the roots of her being. But it is hard not to feel the futility of any attempt at sympathetic response when all the time in the background we have the stern figure of Dr Harrison denying that sympathy is in any way required, in view of the destination on which our attention and Amelia's should be focused, namely, other-worldly justice.

The reader's responses are further thwarted by the fact that the two main characters seem constitutionally predisposed to realize themselves in attitudes towards action rather than in action itself. The question of the social relevance of Christian principles is expressed in the opposition of inertia on the part of Booth and the determined attempt to disregard events on the part of Amelia, so that

although there is a conflict of ideas, there is nothing much happening with which the reader can become involved. The two do care enough about events to show concern for their immediate consequences for each other, thus offering the reader some possibility of an other than intellectual response, but because the reader is at such a distance from them their concern does not readily find expression except as rather inadequate cries of despair, theatrical gestures and swoons. There can be no real tension in the conflict which develops because the philosophy being advocated denies that there is anything of importance happening about which to worry, and because the complexity of moral issues is always hypothetical, since the reader is never really involved enough in the moral experience to feel any sense of responsibility or moral consequence. In Tom Jones, on the other hand, where a whole system of values based upon the personal interest of each man in the experience of his fellow man is at stake, and where the reader's sympathetic involvement in the experience of Tom confers upon the reader himself responsibility for those of Tom's actions that are endangering that system of values, a very real tension is built up which is only extrinsically related to the pressure arising from the conflict presented in the plot.

It is this last point which is central to my argument for the value of story in the novel. It might be argued, for example, that Amelia is less successful than Fielding's earlier novels simply because it is less enjoyable: Fielding is exploring complex moral questions and he is not prepared to risk clouding the issues by

pursuing interests such as the story which might make his undertaking more palatable to the reader but which do not bear directly upon his argument. But, as Simon O. Lesser has observed, since we become involved in a story which moves us, there is a sense in which we must accept responsibility for those stories that we enjoy.[13] Because of his emotional involvement in Tom Jones, the reader himself is as much on trial as Tom is. He may indeed prove inadequate to the test, but he has at least been engaged in a challenge which is of personal rather than hypothetical significance. In Amelia Fielding seems to have decided that he is dealing with issues that are too important to justify this kind of gamble.[14] Sterne in Tristram Shandy reveals that the risks are in fact warranted, that what the story-teller hazards in trusting to the reader's capacity for fellow-feeling is far outweighed by the dangers of conclusions drawn from impersonal facts.

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13 Simon O. Lesser, Fiction and the Unconscious (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 239.

14 Some of Fielding's comments in Amelia also suggest that he had come to the conclusion that the risks were in fact greater than he had imagined. After Dr Harrison has reduced Amelia to tears, for example, Fielding observes that however blunt Harrison appeared, "he had a tenderness of heart which is rarely found among men; for which I know no other reason than that true goodness is rarely found among them" (IX, iv; II, p. 129).

CHAPTER 8

Tristram Shandy: The Life and Opinions of a Story-teller

It is perhaps fitting that, since Tristram Shandy itself follows such an oblique course, its bearing on this argument should be similarly tangential. Commanding centre-stage in Sterne's novel is not a story but a story-teller, and what follows in this chapter moves from the discussion of the function of story in the novel to a study of the function of a story-teller. Like Conrad and Faulkner after him, Sterne added another dimension to his novel by portraying a man in the act of telling a story - a story, moreover, which reveals as much about the suppositious teller as it does about its ostensible subject. Although Sterne's novel has as its titular subject Tristram himself, one of the most perplexing questions raised by the work is why, when Tristram spends so much of his time telling stories about other people rather than himself, we should finally know him as we know few other characters in literature. Part of the answer lies, I think, in the fact that it is possible to know something of a man by the kind of stories he tells or enjoys. To come to terms with Sterne's methods in Tristram Shandy is, on the one hand, to understand the full ramifications of Lessor's observation that we should accept responsibility for the stories we enjoy, and, on the other hand, to appreciate the sacrifices entailed in a narrative strategy such as Fielding's in Amelia. For

in the hands of a story-teller like Tristram - or Marlow or Quentin - narrative becomes not simply a veiled form of argument but a means of making sense of the world.

Tristram is, admittedly, a teasing, exasperating story-teller, and at first glance the only sense that he makes of his world seems to be the game sense of an inveterate clown.[1] Furthermore, Tristram is both vehicle and victim of that ridicule by which Sterne had "hopes of doing the world good".[2] To approach Sterne's novel through the function of Tristram as story-teller, therefore, would seem to be courting the kind of trouble inherent in any attempt to appropriate a complex and subtle novel to the service of a specific argument. But central to the very complexity and subtlety of Tristram Shandy is the relationship between Tristram as story-teller and Sterne as maker of the teller and the story told. What Tristram does and what Sterne does with Tristram are not always the same thing, and perhaps the best example of Sterne's devious stage-management of his wayward hero is his handling of Tristram's cock-and-bull story.

Christopher Ricks has called Tristram Shandy "the greatest shaggy-dog story in the language",[3] and while the accolade is meant

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1 For the argument that this might well be sense enough, see Richard Lanham, *Tristram Shandy*: The Games of Pleasure (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

2 Letter to Dr. *****, Jan. 30, 1760, in Letters of Laurence Sterne, ed. Lewis Perry Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 90.

3 Introduction to Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, ed. Graham Petrie (Harmondsworth Middlesex: Penguin, 1967), p. 7. This edition of Tristram Shandy is cited throughout.

to be light-hearted and is not intended as an indication of the novel's literary excellence, it is at least technically apposite. The shaggy-dog story is a specifically anticlimactic variation on the cock-and-bull story, a teasing narrative game which derives its limited inherent charm from its ability to lead an audience on endlessly in order to get it nowhere. The game requires only a good technique, and relies for its success on the practitioner's capacity to make the process of telling a satisfaction in itself, for in terms of material action the narrative is "about" very little.[4] When we consider that Tristram manages to maintain our interest in his cock-and-bull story for nine volumes containing some six hundred pages, we can appreciate his consummate mastery of the purely technical aspect of story-telling. At the beginning of the novel he asks us to bear with him if he should seem "somewhat sparing" of his narrative, and then proceeds to spread his action very thinly, refusing to capitulate to that "vile pruriency for fresh adventures" that makes a reader content with only "the gross and more carnal parts of a composition" (I, xx, p. 84). Finally, having led his readers an elaborate wild-goose chase, he confronts them with an ending which is anticlimactic in the tradition of the most infuriating shaggy-dog stories. Tristram's life and opinions end with a complaint about a bull which has been enjoying its copulative rights

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4 Some idea of this characteristic lack of substance can be gauged from the tale cited by the Oxford English Dictionary as its first literary example of the cock-and-bull story. It is "a Tale of two things, a Cock and a Bull, metamorpozed into one, whereof the one having been as confidently as untruly avowed to be assuredly known to be the other, viz. the Cock to be a Bull, is (being denyed) as ridiculously as reasonlessly profer'd to be proved in this illegal and illogical way of Argumentation, etc." (S. Fisher, Rusticks Alarm, Wks., 1679).

but not living up to its conceptive responsibilities, a complaint which Sterne's less enthusiastic critics seize as a judgement on the book as a whole.

For those who equate a good story with stirring action, and for those who think that the serious business of writing novels can have little to do with the construction of cock-and-bull stories, the last words of Tristram Shandy must certainly seem incriminating: in reply to Mrs Shandy's exasperated query, "Lord! . . . what is all this story about?", Yorick returns, "A COCK and a BULL . . . --And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard" (IX, xxxiii, p. 615). But Yorick's comment refers in its immediate context to a specific incident, and while it also serves Tristram's purpose of intercepting and defusing criticism before it can be voiced, the comment cannot be applied unreservedly to the novel as a whole without misrepresenting Sterne or underestimating the sophistication of his achievement. Tristram is an accomplished technician, knowledgeable in the ways of stories and astute in his anticipation of the reader's responses. As such, he can afford to clown on that thin line between pleasurably frustrating an audience and driving it to distraction. But Sterne is a wise Fool, and can make a cock-and-bull story "a lesson to the world, 'to let people tell their stories their own way'" (IX, xxv, p. 602).

Sterne was aware not only of the art but also of the value of story-telling. In a sermon on the prodigal son he noted precisely that potential of a story for which I have been arguing throughout this study, observing that

> Lessons of wisdom have never such power over us, as when they are wrought into the heart, through the groundwork of a story which engages the passions.[5]

For the sentimentalist in Sterne, the supreme lesson of wisdom was to know with the heart, and stories are both a source and a product of this knowledge. It may seem surprising, therefore, that in Tristram Shandy he has chosen to present us with a cock-and-bull story. Its obfuscations and delays would appear unlikely to cultivate any passion other than frustrated anger,[6] but they are in fact a double-edged weapon in Sterne's particular sentimental enterprise. Wherever Tristram's mind may wander, as a story-teller his heart is always in the right place, and Sterne's lesson of wisdom lies as much in the fact that Tristram tells stories as in the facts that the stories reveal. Furthermore, when we examine the game Tristram plays with story in the novel, we find that, rather than undermining the reader's confidence in the validity of knowing with the heart, it chastens the reader's susceptibility to the charms of more abstract speculation.

As Tristram begins to tell his story, he finds himself confronted with the need to satisfy our fondness for grand impersonal truths. He gives us what we want, but with characteristically extravagant generosity gives us more than we really need, so that action bogs

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5 Laurence Sterne, The Sermons of Mr. Yorick, ed. Marjorie David (Cheadle, Cheshire: Carcanet Press, 1973), p. 94.

6 Tristram does acknowledge this danger early in the novel when he asks the reader to "either laugh with me, or at me, or in short do any thing,--only keep your temper" (I, vi, p. 41).

down in bewildering detail and ideas perplex rather than clarify. For all the theorizing, hypothesizing, and systematizing in Tristram Shandy, the most effective means of communication is revealed to be sentiment, the sentient apprehension of one human being by another. It is intuitive sympathy rather than intellectual understanding that allows the isolated creatures of the Shandy world to know one another, and that finally allows the reader to know Tristram. The wisdom that Tristram has to offer is that of a man who exists only as a story-teller, who is absorbed in his task and in the characters about whom he cares, and who, as Conrad said of the artist in general:

> speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation--and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity . . . which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity--the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.[7]

Tristram Shandy is a rich and complex novel, and as such a temptation to any critic with a particular hobby-horse to ride. This study of the function of the story-teller is therefore undertaken in full knowledge of the dangers involved, but also in the belief that it may help to explain the means by which a teasing jester acquires the virtues of a professional Fool.

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[7] Joseph Conrad, Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, p. viii.

Tristram Shandy begins, as all good stories should, with the hero in a predicament calculated to arouse the reader's concern. The details of Tristram's bedevilled conception give promise of a life which is to be vexed by circumstance and harassed at every turn, and if that life is, to the taste of some, just a little too long in emerging, Tristram cannot be accused of failing to give due warning. The scattering and dispersal of animal spirits, the result, Tristram tells us, of his mother's untimely interruption of Walter's concentration, laid the foundation "for a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind" (I, ii, p. 37). Tristram, it seems, was born to be erratic, and the convoluted course of the narrative would appear to bear witness to his disordered state of mind.

On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the cause of the inordinate dalliance with the narrative between conception and birth is not Tristram's caprice but his painstaking care. As early as the fourth chapter of Book I he acknowledges that

> there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all,--who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of everything which concerns you.
>
> It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs, and from a backwardness in my nature to disappoint any one soul living, that I have been so very particular already. (I, iv, pp. 37 - 38)

In mock-obedience to this inquisitiveness, Tristram begins "ab Ovo", tells when and how he was born, and, as it happens, little else directly about himself. He manages to provide us with the facts concerning his conception and date of birth with uncharacteristic economy and precision, and manages in the process to be too precise

for comfort.[8] But of more immediate concern to the curious reader is the maze of circumstance which he must navigate in order to arrive at the knowledge of how Tristram was born. We are launched into a perplexing sequence of anecdotes, which range from forays into midwifery, hobby-horses, marriage contracts, pre-natal baptism, and Uncle Toby's wound, to the death-bed scene of a gentleman in whose living presence we still find ourselves at the end of the novel.

Yet, if we find our curiosity frustrated rather than satisfied by this excursion into the past, we have only ourselves to blame. The story that Tristram is telling does not court this kind of curiosity; it seeks instead that interest in a character about whom we come to care that Tristram expounds in chapter six:

> As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship.--O diem praeclarum!--then nothing which has touched me will be thought trifling in its nature, or tedious in its telling.[9] (I, vi, p. 41)

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8 For a detailed examination of the complications caused by Tristram's concern for detail, see John A. Hay, "Rhetoric and Historiography: Tristram Shandy's First Nine Kalendar Months", in Studies in the Eighteenth Century, I, ed. R. F. Brissenden (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973), pp. 73 - 91. This aspect of the novel will be explored later in the chapter.

9 Something of Sterne's own attitude towards the role of curiosity can be judged from a note appended to his memoirs: "I have set down these particulars relating to my family, and self, for my Lydia, in case hereafter she might have a curiosity or a kinder motive to know them" ("Memoirs of the Life and Family of the Late Rev. Mr. Laurence Sterne", in Letters of Laurence Sterne, p. 5).

The academic inquisitiveness that can only be satisfied by knowing "the whole secret from first to last", that is delighted by the structure of "the three most perfect plots ever planned", is revealed in Tristram Shandy to be mean-minded and potentially destructive. In Tom Jones the secret of Tom's parentage is a niggling tease which alerts the reader's mind to veiled inferences, and while it also serves as a benevolent warning to those readers prone to making rash judgements, it is still a mystery which can be unravelled to provide the reader with a certain pleasure in his own ingenuity. In Tristram Shandy, however, Tristram's birth is delayed just long enough for the reader to digest the facts relating to his conception, and to manufacture a mystery of parentage which this time serves as a more disturbing warning to those who accept unthinkingly the value of that interpretation through inference on which clever minds - and the novel - thrive.

The trap which Sterne sets for the prying reader is cleverly disguised by narrative logic. Personal histories of fictional characters usually begin at the hero's birth - as do those of Tom Jones and Moll Flanders, for example. But Tristram argues, with superior logic, that life really begins at conception. So he begins his story on what is assumed to be the night in question. Tristram knows, by a memorandum in Walter Shandy's pocket-book, that Walter was in London from 25 March, 1718, until May of the same year. He also knows that in the preceding December, January, and February Walter was afflicted with sciatica. So if there was any conceiving to be done, it could only have been during the first three weeks of

March, since Tristram was born on 5 November, 1718. Thanks to Walter's precise habits, however, Tristram can determine the date with even more accuracy; that is, the first Sunday in March. Tristram says of Walter that he was

> one of the most regular men in everything he did, whether 'twas matter of business, or matter of amusement, that ever lived. As a small specimen of this extreme exactness of his, to which he was in truth a slave,--he made it a rule for many years of his life,--on the first Sunday night of every month throughout the whole year,--as certain as ever the Sunday night came,----to wind up a large house-clock, which we had standing upon the back-stairs head, with his own hands:--And being somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age, at the time I have been speaking of,--he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concernments to the same period, in order, as he would often say to my Uncle Toby, to get them all out of the way at the one time, and be no more plagued and pestered with them the rest of the month. (I, iv, p. 39)

It is to this extreme regularity of habit in Walter that Tristram, with some irony, attributes his own irregularity. Because Walter's winding of the clock and his doing of his duty by his wife had become contiguous activities, Mrs Shandy could not be involved with the one without thinking of the other. Hence her untimely question, "Pray, my dear, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?"; hence Walter's perturbed exclamation, "Good G--! Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?"; hence the scattering and dispersal of Tristram's animal spirits; hence Tristram's vulnerability to misfortune. Tristram's mother's inability to keep her mind on the job in hand has apparently produced a son whose mind is similarly prone to wander.

Walter also believes that Tristram's character was determined on that night. Early in the book we find Walter observing the "unaccountable obliquity" with which Tristram sets up his top, an incident which causes him to comment that Tristram will "neither think nor act like any other man's child" because his "misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world" (I, iii, p. 37). But if we go back to those dates which Tristram has given us, we find that if Tristram's misfortunes did begin nine months before he came into the world, he most certainly will act like another man's child, because Walter cannot be his father. It has been established that there is only one day on which Tristram could have been conceived by Walter and Mrs Shandy: that is, the first Sunday in March, 1718. Tristram was born on 5 November, 1718, and between those two dates there are only eight months - rather less than the nine calendar months that a fastidious husband might demand.

In this manner Sterne prepares the way for the enterprising reader to engage in a little malicious gossip, with Yorick as its victim. Yorick does spend rather a lot of time at the Shandy household, and Toby, the only other regular visitor, would seem to be incapacitated by his groin injury. If we eliminate Walter, therefore, Yorick becomes the most likely candidate, both by proximity and by default. As if in anticipation of this gross aspersion on his character, Yorick dies broken-hearted in chapter twelve of the first volume. Before his death, Eugenius warns him that

> REVENGE from some baneful corner shall level
> a tale of dishonour at thee, which no innocence
> of heart or integrity of conduct shall set right.
> ----The fortunes of thy house shall totter,--thy

> character, which led the way to them, shall bleed on every side of it,--thy faith questioned,--thy works belied,--thy wit forgotten,--thy learning trampled on. To wind up the last scene of thy tragedy, CRUELTY and COWARDICE, twin ruffians, hired and set on by MALICE in the dark, shall strike together at all thy infirmities and mistakes:----the best of us, my dear lad, lie open there,----and trust me,----trust me, Yorick, When to gratify a private appetite, it is once resolved upon, that an innocent and an helpless creature shall be sacrificed, 'tis an easy matter to pick up sticks enew from any thicket where it has strayed, to make a fire to offer it up with.[10] (I, xii, p. 58)

Yorick's death effectively images the potential destructiveness of the kind of inferential detective-work that R. S. Crane suggests is one of the satisfactions provided by plot.[11] Yorick is gentle and kind-hearted, and too generous in his opinion of others to take the care to protect himself with a righteous demeanour. After his death we are left with two black pages where Tristram, like Hamlet, jests with Yorick on the edge of the grave.[12] But while Tristram is playing visual tricks, Sterne is also expressing on a literary level what Yorick's death has already embodied on a human level: the fact that certain kinds of criticism can kill. On a literary level it is the power of words to communicate honestly that is endangered, and the final consequence is mute incoherence. Those two black pages say nothing that the reader can wrongly interpret; they only mourn.

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10 The italics are Sterne's.

11 R. S. Crane, "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones", p. 621.

12 The two black pages actually lie in the book like the chasm of a ready-dug grave.

While Sterne in this manner subtly challenges the deceptively innocent pleasures of the kind of inferential deduction that is encouraged by the carefully staged revelations of a well-constructed plot, he is more blatantly destructive in his handling of the intellectual satisfactions provided by plot. Plot is the most effective means by which novelists give their narrative a significant shape. It selects events on the basis of their contribution to a meaningful design, and links those events, usually by cause-and-effect, so that one seems to lead inevitably to another. But design can also involve deceit, particularly when it entails the imposition of a comprehensible plan on a world which is basically unknowable by rational means. Indeed, as Tristram argues,

> we live amongst riddles and mysteries--the most obvious things, which come in our way, have dark sides, which the quickest sight cannot penetrate into; and even the clearest and most exalted understandings amongst us find ourselves puzzled and at a loss in almost every cranny of nature's works. (IV, xvii, p. 292)

Initially, however, the reader may find little consolation in the knowledge that, since such is life, so is Sterne's novel going to be. He is put off balance, without the reassuring footholds of a coherent plot or reliable narrative thread to tell him where he might be going next or why he should want to go there. And "going" is hardly the word to describe what happens to what is loosely termed the "action" of Tristram Shandy. E. M. Forster has observed that

> There is a charmed stagnation about the whole epic - the more the characters do, the less gets done, the less they have to say the more they talk, the harder they think the softer they get, facts have an unholy tendency to unwind and trip up the past instead of begetting the future, as

> in well-conducted books . . . Obviously a god is hidden in Tristram Shandy, his name is Muddle, and some readers cannot accept him.[13]

Muddle there certainly is in the novel, though Tristram, it seems, subscribes to a more orthodox deity, beginning, as he tells us, with "the first sentence----and trusting to Almight God for the second" (VIII, ii, p. 516).

In view of the confusion abounding in Tristram Shandy, it may at first seem surprising that, on a closer look at the novel, we find that Sterne has not in fact abandoned plot. He has simply undermined its fragile illusion of coherence by extending the logic of its favourite tool, cause-and-effect, to its endlessly regressive, necessarily chaotic extreme. Like Walter, Tristram is an intemperate pursuer of notions that take his fancy, but unlike his systematizing father, he does not select facts according to a preconceived plan. Thus, in order to explain how he was born, he decides that he must first explain the presence of two midwives at his birth. In order to account for the woman midwife, he must first explain how circumstance and the woman's reputation for good sense made her a midwife. In order to do that he must introduce us to Parson Yorick. At this stage there is no necessity to launch into a discussion of hobby-horses, but since the subject has already been raised by mention of Yorick's decrepit nag, and since the subject will eventually have to be raised in order to explain Mrs Shandy's unusually assertive stance in the selection of a woman midwife of good sense and Mr Shandy's

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13 E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, p. 117.

equally determined insistence on a man midwife with some claim to scientific technique, this seems as good a time as any. But before he can explain the Shandys' respective hobby-horses, he must first explain how this particular conflict arose: hence the details of the marriage contract. And there we are, seventy-odd pages into the novel, and Tristram is still another seventy pages from being born.

There are indeed, as Walter claims, "shorter ways of getting to work" (V, xlii, p. 394), and the conventional plot structure is one of them. By having Tristram judiciously select pertinent principles from the morass of intertwined impulses that govern the lives of the Shandys, Sterne could quite easily have produced a comprehensible structure which would give all the appearance of a mind coming to grips with the vagaries of experience. But for an author to impose this kind of plot on a world, to organize what is by nature fragmentary and endlessly reductive into a neat, clearly defined and comfortable whole, is to do little more than what most of the characters in Tristram Shandy are laughed at for doing: riding their hobby-horses roughshod over inconveniently irregular surfaces. Toby, Walter, and Mrs Shandy have in a sense plotted their lives. Toby understands the world in terms of war games, Walter in terms of codified systems, and Mrs Shandy in terms of the concept of wife, and each derives a great deal of comfort from the over-simplification of his hobby-horsical design. Toby's mastery of the subject of sieges, for example, enables him to cope with the "passions and affections" that his wound occasioned. Walter's engrossment with the extensive

implications of an intriguing idea enables him to cope with the personal implications of Bobby's death. And Mrs Shandy's complete channelling of her interests into the role of wife enables her to live with Walter. Individual hobby-horses are innocent and engaging enough. They become dangerous only when the rider compels others to get up and ride behind him - which is what an author can be accused of doing if he ignores the complexities of experience and the individual integrity of his characters in his pursuit of a unified scheme.

In the conventional novel, the characters and their lives become absorbed into the author's design, to emerge edited and rechannelled so that they live only in respect to the subject of the novel. In Tristram Shandy, however, Sterne creates characters who seem to have a life independent of the concerns of the narrator. Toby and Walter go their own intractable ways, often to the dismay of Tristram, who feels he has an obligation not only to them but to the reader as well. But while Tristram finds himself forced into a little desperate juggling, in constant fear of running out of both hands and time, Sterne is also asking teasing questions about the very nature of a narrator's obligations and priorities. In depriving Tristram of the aid of a hobby-horsical design, Sterne has, in more ways than one, saddled him with a heavy burden.

Tristram's dismay at the task at hand occasionally surfaces in the novel as characters crowd in upon him, disturbing his scarcely mastered thoughts. Business is often unfinished, his frustrations are many, and he bemoans his inability to write about life as fast

as he is living it. In one instance his lament becomes frenetic; he feels the need to explain something about his mother, but breaks off with the cry:

> ---but I have fifty things more necessary to let you know first,--I have a hundred difficulties which I have promised to clear up, and a thousand distresses and domestic misadventures crowding in upon me thick and threefold, one upon the neck of another,---a cow broke in (to-morrow morning) to my Uncle Toby's fortifications, and eat up two ratios and half of dried grass, tearing up the sods with it, which faced his horn-work and covered way. --Trim insists upon being tried by a court-martial, --the cow to be shot,--Slop to be crucifixed,-- myself to be tristramed, and at my very baptism made a martyr of;--poor unhappy devils that we are!--I want swaddling,---but there is no time to be lost in exclamations.---I have left my father lying across his bed, and my Uncle Toby in his old fringed chair, sitting beside him, and promised I would go back to them in half an hour, and five-and-thirty minutes are lapsed already. (III, xxxviii, p. 240)

With all this to be done, and with death hounding his footsteps, it is little wonder that Tristram sometimes throws his pen into the fire, or is forced to admit that he is temporarily lost.

Tristram's spirit is resilient enough, however, to bounce back from despair, and to delight in the exhilaration of a freedom from convention that can dance in the face of chaos and death. The dance is unavoidably erratic but ultimately beneficial, for it promotes "True Shandeism", which

> opens the hearts and lungs, and . . . forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely through its channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round. (IV, xxxii, p. 333)

True Shandeism tells us how to cope with the riot of life: we should not sit down and gravely try to organize it into nice straight lines;

we should immerse ourselves in all its glorious muddle and enjoy the sheer pleasure of process. Tristram tells us that

> in these sportive plains, and under this genial sun, where at this instant all flesh is running out piping, fiddling, and dancing to the vintage, and every step that's taken, the judgement is surprised by the imagination, I defy, notwithstanding all that has been said upon straight lines in sundry pages of my book--I defy the best cabbage planter that ever existed, whether he plants backwards or forwards, it makes little difference in the account . . . --I defy him to go on coolly, critically, and canonically, planting his cabbages one by one, in straight lines, and stoical distances, especially if slits in petticoats are unsewed up--without ever and anon straddling out, or sidling into some bastardly digression. (VIII, i, p. 515, footnote omitted).

Tristram's cavortings may defy the values of the straight line, which the divines say is the right line and the pathway for Christians to walk in, and which Cicero says is the emblem of moral rectitude, and which cabbage planters say is the best line since it is the shortest, but they are not gratuitous, or even beyond choreography.[14] Furthermore, given the frenzied rhythm and the complicated melody to which he must move, Tristram is surprisingly agile. When confronted with the aggressive independence of undisciplined and undisciplinable experience, Tristram makes a virtue of necessity. If life is going to carry on without him there to direct it, then he can busy himself elsewhere. He can let Mrs Shandy be pinned with her ear to the door by the word "wife" and know that, however long he stays away, she will still be there when he wants her. Or if the attempt to explain

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[14] Tristram provides his own choreography on page 453.

how he was born necessitates excursions into the feasibility of pre-natal baptism or Uncle Toby's obsession with sieges, then he can be sure that the affairs of his birth will not stand still in his absence: during "an hour and a half's tolerable good reading", Obadiah will have had ample time to seek out and return with the man midwife.

In these examples Tristram is sumultaneously playing two complicated games, one with the idea of an autonomous narrative process, and the other with the existence of two separate but synchronous time-schemes - fictional time and reading time.[15] Both of these games require considerable skill, and, indeed, considerable devotion to the purely technical aspect of narrative, since they contribute little to either the material progression of the action or the deeper significance of the tale as a whole.[16] Much the same can be said of the interlacing of narrative threads on which these games depend, because although a similar degree of skill is required to juggle several different tales at once, the interlacing tends to disperse narrative energy and to delay the resolution interminably. For the medieval practitioner of this technique, the interweaving of different strands satisfied

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15 The game played with time is sometimes further complicated by the addition of writing time. The ingenuity with which Sterne handles the intricacies of his multiple chronologies is described by Theodore Baird in "The Time-Scheme in Tristram Shandy and a source", PMLA, LI (1936), 803 - 820.

16 It can be argued that, for Sterne at least, the games promote an illusion of life, reflecting the complexities of existence and the similtaneity and contingency of received perceptions. But it should also be noted that the very nature of the games as narrative contrivances detracts from the illusion by drawing attention to the fact of reading.

the contemporary demand for amplification and variation. Sterne's audience, however, was less appreciative of such qualities, and might well have asked why interlacing should be cultivated at all.

For Sterne, part of the answer lies in the simple fact that a jester who juggles well is entertaining. The games are there to be enjoyed, whether or not they facilitate the movement of the action towards its end. Like Ariosto before him, Sterne draws the analogy between this style of narrative and the process of travelling, and he finds in it much the same truth: that is, that it is better to journey than to arrive. In Book VII, for example, Tristram berates those travel-writers who, when confronted with a large plain, can see it as "of little or no use to them but to carry them to some town; and that town, perhaps of little more, but a new place to start from to the next plain" (VII, xlii, p. 509). Tristram handles his plains much better, zigzagging backwards and forwards, loitering behind people to observe them, and hurrying onwards to overtake them. In short, Tristram tells us,

> by seizing every handle, of what size or shape soever, which chance held out to me in this journey--I turned my plain into a city--I was always in company, and with great variety too: and as my mule loved company as much as myself, and had some proposals always on his part to offer to every beast he met--I am confident we could have passed through Pall Mall, or St James's Street for a month together, with fewer adventures--and seen less of human nature. (VII, xliii, p. 511)

By the technique of interlacing Sterne has not only provided the reader with the entertainment of an expert juggler at work, he has also made of the tiny Shandy society a world in a nutshell.

Arthur Ransome has observed that, "In this book, where nothing seems to happen, everything does", adding that

> If Tristram Shandy does not grow up quick enough to take to himself a wife, My Uncle Toby is taken as a husband by the Widow Wadman. If he does not die, Yorick does. If My Uncle Toby's affairs do not go far enough to produce a baby, Tristram is born . . . It is the Life and Opinions, not of Tristram Shandy, but of Humanity, illustrated, not in a single character over a long period, but in a half a dozen over a short one.[17]

Yet for the reader who comes to Sterne's novel expecting to learn something of the life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, gentleman, an insight into the workings of human nature, however enlightening or entertaining, might seem like a poor return. This was precisely the reaction of Sterne's eighteenth-century audience, who greeted the first few volumes with enthusiasm but then became increasingly disenchanted, wanting and failing to get more of Tristram's life and less of the digressions that Tristram claim are "the sunshine . . . the life, the soul of reading" (I, xxii, p. 95). For as Ransome also notes, in Tristram Shandy Sterne indulges in

> the art, not of telling stories, but of withholding them, not of keeping things on the move, but of keeping them on the point of moving. It is not without some difficulty and two or three chapters that a character of Sterne's crosses the room. The nine books of Tristram Shandy bring him through the midwife's hands, and a little further. I believe we hear breeches talked of for him. Another nine books would perhaps let him put one leg into them.[18]

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17 Arthur Ransome, A History of Story-telling, p. 170.

18 ibid., 169.

The technique of withholding stories would seem on the surface to offer the narrative artist little but a novel and relatively unproductive way to go about very ordinary business, and for the eighteenth-century reader who was intent upon "satisfying the impatience of [his] concupiscence", Samuel Johnson's comment on Tristram Shandy that "Nothing odd will do long" must have come as some comfort. But Tristram Shandy did last, as did the technique of withholding stories. So too, however, did the main obstacle to its appreciation, the misapprehension that the practitioner is deliberately obscuring the end so that it will seem all the more impressive when he gets there.

Conrad Aiken, for example, commenting on the practice of withholding the story in the novels of William Faulkner, maintains that the method involves

> a persistent offering of obstacles, a calculated system of screens and obtrusions, of confusions and ambiguous interpolations and delays, with one express purpose; and that purpose is simply to keep the form--and the idea--fluid and unfinished, still in motion, as it were, and still unknown, until the dropping into place of the very last syllable.[19]

Aiken, however, overlooks the fact that when Faulkner does drop the very last syllable into place what we have is still "fluid and unfinished", and still unknown. In As I Lay Dying, for example, the

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19 Conrad Aiken, "William Faulkner: The Novel as Form", in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticisms, ed. F. J. Hoffman and O. W. Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), p. 138.

reader spends most of the novel trying to work out what the Bundrens are trying to prove by their extraordinary journey, only to arrive at the end of the novel, still not knowing, to discover that, whatever they are doing, they are about to do it all over again. Similarly, Light in August at the end brings Joe Christmas back to his starting point, being forced down on his knees to pray for a forgiveness which he not only does not desire but which he thinks in all justice should be given by him if there is any forgiving to be done. And Absalom, Absalom! ends by asking the same question which has prompted the preceding four-hundred pages: "Why do you hate the South?"

There is no final, authoritative story in Faulkner's novels because the only people who could drop the last syllable informatively into place - the wise of the earth, the people who know the end - remain consistently silent. What Dilsey knows, for example, she is not telling, not out of spite or any feeling of superiority, but because she feels no need. The people who do need stories are, to quote Isaac in Go Down, Moses,

> the doomed and lowly of the earth who have nothing to read with but the heart.[20]

These people tell or write

> the heart's truth out of the heart's driving complexity, for all the complex and troubled hearts that would beat after them.[21]

One after another Faulkner's characters try to shape events into stories that will satisfy their own needs and offer them some respite,

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20 William Faulkner, Go Down, Moses (1942; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1960), p. 198

21 ibid., p. 198.

and through these stories the reader encounters, not the stories' subjects, but the story-tellers. We learn what they value, what they feel is significant, by the stories they tell.

In Tristram Shandy, Sterne withholds the story with a similar effect. Although Tristram is himself the ostensible subject of the novel, he gets born and little else. Mention is made of his childhood, and the question of a tutor is broached, but from there on his life, if not his opinions, is swallowed up in the affairs of Toby and Walter. Tristram Shandy finally ends as it had begun - with an interruption. The digressions, whose wheels, Tristram claims, so intersect with the wheels of the progressive movement "that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going" (I, xxii, p. 95), wind so far back upon themselves that by the end of the novel we find ourselves enjoying a jest, made years before Tristram was born, by a gentleman whose death we mourned in the first fifty pages.

The ending of Tristram Shandy is certainly anticlimactic in the broadest sense of the word, since it has fallen as far short of expectation as the bull has, but it is an ending for which we should have been well-prepared. Tristram relates several interpolated tales within the novel, most of which never reach a satisfactory conclusion. Two notable examples are Slawkenbergius's Tale and Le Fever's Story. Of these, the former is the more immediately striking in its deficiency, because it is accompanied by Tristram's extravagant praise of its structure.

Slawkenbergius's Tale is one of Walter's favourites, and it begins promisingly enough with the protagonist in a situation which

rouses our interest. The reader is confronted with the dignified forbearance of a stranger resolutely intent upon his journey despite the tumult his extraordinary nose is creating in the populace of Strasburg. He travels through the city, leaving behind him the townsfolk arguing whether or not his nose is a true nose or a false one. Later we learn that it was this same question that had set him off on his journey: Julia, his lover, had voiced suspicions about his nose. As he continues on his way he meets Julia's brother, who tells him that Julia has been trying to find him and now lies exhausted and possibly dying. He rushes to her side, leaving the people of Strasburg lined up at the gate of their city, eagerly awaiting his promised return so that they can find out whether his nose is substantial or contrived. But neither the Strasburgers nor the reader ever find out the truth. The tale is cruelly aborted in order to pursue an oblique moral lesson,[22] and we are left without the satisfaction of having either our curiosity gratified by knowledge or our concern for the stranger eased by witnessing reconciliation in a climactic lovers' embrace.

Le Fever's Story begins in an equally promising fashion. We find an impoverished soldier on his death-bed making one last, simple request. We know nothing of the man himself, but we can judge something of his character by the solicitude he inspires in an inn-keeper (a breed of men not generally renowned for excessive

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22 Tristram, of course, derives a quite different lesson from this tale, a lesson which becomes less effective the more he pursues it.

devotion to impoverished customers). Toby finds his interest is stirred and he wants to know more. He learns the pitiful history of this noble man who has been dogged by misfortune from the very moment that his wife was shot dead as she lay in his arms at the camp at Breda. His present misery, moreover, is compounded by the knowledge that he is leaving penniless a son who has apparently inherited all his father's fine attributes. After Le Fever's death, the tale languishes until the boy is old enough to reveal that he has also inherited his father's unmerited vulnerability to misfortune. He returns home from the wars, after four years of being buffeted by mischance, to the welcoming arms of Uncle Toby and, hopefully, to a fitting reward for a lad possessed of the best and bravest of hearts. The latter, however, we never learn. The tale has been inserted in the middle of a discussion concerning a tutor for Tristram, and Toby's recommendation of Le Fever's son for the position is for him the logical end of both the discussion and the story. But as Toby rises in praise of the boy and Trim and Yorick join him in support, Trim's enthusiasm once again leads him astray. Toby's generalization that the best of hearts are ever the bravest prompts Trim to observe that the greatest cowards are also the greatest rascals, and he begins to support his argument with examples from his own regiment. Walter, however, has had enough, and he cuts Trim, the discussion, and the story short with "We'll talk about them . . . another time" (VI, xiii, p. 418).

It is not a great story, but it does serve, if not Toby's purpose, at least Sterne's. Toby's simplicity and tender heart is as

much revealed in the pathos of this tale and in his confidence in the relevance of its logic to everyday life as Walter's well-meaning obduracy is revealed in his insensitivity to the claims Le Fever's son is making on his affections and in his fondness for Slawkenbergius's hard-headed philosophy. Like Faulkner - and like Conrad - Sterne capitalizes on the narrative significance of the fact of story-telling, of the illuminating relationship between the story and its teller and audience.[23] But in Tristram Shandy Sterne also goes one step further to celebrate the very act of story-telling. By withholding the story and by throwing the emphasis onto Tristram's technique, he has us encounter the story-teller as a story-teller - and, in the process, teaches us the value of sentiment, the capacity to know with the heart.

Much has been written on Sterne's aggrandizement of sentiment, and a lot of it is adverse. He can certainly be sentimental in a maudlin, pathetic extreme - as he is, for example, in The Journal to Eliza, a work he did well to abandon. But in Tristram Shandy the extremes of sentiment are generally balanced by the corrective edge of wit. If we take one example of sentimentality at its potential worst we can see this corrective at work. The pathetic little tale of Amandus and Amanda should really be read in its outrageous entirety

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23 In Conrad's Heart of Darkness, for example, the import of Marlow's tale lies not in the attempt to understand Kurtz but in the tension between a simple, decent man and his fascination with a grotesque mystery. By means of the tale, Conrad tells us as much about Marlow as he does about the subject, Kurtz, and, more importantly, tells us something about ourselves as well. For to the extent to which we respond to the urgency of Marlow's narration and become absorbed in the story, we must share both Marlow's horror and his fascination.

in order to appreciate the absurdity of its extravagance, but enough of Sterne's intention can be gauged by the way in which he ends the tale and the way in which he frames it. By pursuing sentiment to its extreme, Tristram only manages to affront our sensibilities: the lovers, after suffering the torment of separation and fruitless search for each other, by chance at last cross paths at the gate of their native city,

> and each in well-known accents calling out aloud,
>
> Is Amandus) still alive?
> Is my Amanda)
>
> they fly into each other's arms, and both drop down dead for joy. (VII, xxxi, p. 496)

Tristram suggests at the beginning of this tale that "There is a sweet era in the life of man" when such a story affords much food for thought. At the end of the tale, however, this is changed to "There is a soft era in every gentle mortal's life . . . " (VII, xxxi, p. 496). The transition from sweetness to softness is a pointed one: Tristram is indeed soft and Sterne knows it.

The real value of sentiment to the story-teller lies not in its self-indulgent gratification of tearful sorrow but in its capacity for penetrating beyond the limits of reason - limits which Sterne understood to be extremely narrow. The tendency, demonstrated in both Toby and Trim, for the mind to make irrational associations rendered reason a most unreliable means of communication. On one occasion, for example, when Toby, Walter, and Dr Slop are discoursing on the improvements in all branches of obstetrical knowledge, Walter has only to take off his wig in order to set Toby off on one of his militaristic associations. The opposed tendency in Walter to become

so obsessed with the faculty of reason that he would "move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture everything in nature, to support his hypothesis" (I, xix, p. 80) does as little to aid communication. For all the boisterous clamour of Walter's aggressive reason, what ultimately speaks loudest is his hand laid gently upon Toby's knee in a moment of sympathetic communion.

It is this kind of sympathetic intuition that the story-teller seeks, and which Tristram himself manifests at its height at what first seems the most uncongenial moment in the novel. Throughout his narrative Tristram has been plagued by a growing sense of urgency, partly the result of his awareness that he is living life faster than he can write about it, and partly the result of his fear that in trying to do justice to all of his characters he is in danger of not doing justice to his reader. Tristram, however, embraces his task with such whole-hearted enthusiasm that the tensions involved in getting his story told supplant the action itself as a source of reader involvement. Yet by the time Tristram reaches the end of the novel, it seems that all the energy he has been putting into his task has finally been dissipated in the inconsequence of a good-humoured jest.

But the end of Tristram Shandy is in fact a triumph of impartial benevolence, a conclusion which is in keeping with the affection Tristram has for all his characters. In the final scene Toby, Walter, and Yorick each in his turn achieves a small victory. Toby's gentle soul survives Trim's revelation of the hard fact of life which prompts the Widow Wadman's concern for his health, and he confronts Walter with "marks of infinite benevolence and forgiveness in his looks" (IX, xxxii, p. 613). Walter, fired by his brother's sensitivity and

vulnerability, launches into a hypothesis which not only encompasses his personal views on the necessity to subjugate the "unruly appetite" for sex, but is also uplifting for Toby. The propagation of the human species, he argues, is achieved by a passion which can be "conveyed to a cleanly mind by no language, translation, or periphrasis whatever" (IX, xxxiii, p. 614), whereas the art of killing and destroying a man and the weapons by which it is done are honourable. As Toby rises to embroider Walter's eloquence, and Yorick is about to batter the whole hypothesis to pieces, Obadiah comes in with his complaint about the parish bull. In one stroke, all three participants in the conversation are provided with a satisfaction for their individual grievances. Toby has found a companion in his distress, Walter is given a timely example to support his hypothesis on the necessity to rise above the carnal passions, and Yorick, without having to do violence to either Toby's or Walter's feelings, can enjoy in private the implicit refutation of man's ability to deny his affinity with the beasts of the field.

The lesson of wisdom that Sterne's novel reveals is the lesson that all story-tellers have to offer: the value of a story which engages the passions. Through Tristram's romp amongst the "delicious riot of things", Sterne has prompted our capacity for delight and wonder; through Tristram's avoidance of the over-simplification of a hobby-horsical design, Sterne has stimulated the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; and through the cultivation of sentiment, he has excited "the subtle but invincible bond of solidarity . . . which binds men to each other, binds together all humanity--the dead to the living and the living to the unborn".

AFTERWORD

The Story-telling Novelist

E. M. Forster suggests that, when asked what the novel does, we should reply "in a sort of drooping regretful voice, 'Yes - oh dear yes - the novel tells a story'".[1] In arguing for the value of story in the novel, I am not suggesting that we should be like Forster's golfer and answer with an aggressive briskness, or like his bus-driver, good-tempered and vague, but that we should, in full awareness of the heritage on which the novel draws, answer with delight and satisfaction, "Yes - indeed yes - the novel can still tell a story". For although my argument ends with the novels of Fielding and Sterne, it is in effect ending at the beginning of that other, perhaps even Greater Tradition of novelists who speak not only to our capacity for reason, but also to basic human feelings as important as the intellect in making specifically human sense of the world.

It has been suggested that the works of Fielding and Sterne represent, for quite different reasons, intriguing dead-ends in the history of the novel. Sterne's exposure of the fiction underlying novelistic conventions suggests obvious formal grounds for excluding Tristram Shandy from any tradition of the novel, though, as will be

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1 Aspects of the Novel, p. 33.

argued later, they are hardly conclusive. Fielding's position is less extreme, though Ian Watt can still assert with some confidence that his works "departed too far from formal realism to initiate a viable tradition", achieving only "a very personal and unrepeatable kind of success".[2] While agreeing with Watt that Fielding's achievement is as unrepeatable, as hard an act to follow, as the work of any literary genius, I would also argue that this is irrelevant to how we should judge his success. If we attribute Fielding's popularity to the idiosyncratic charm of his engaging authorial voice, or his literary merit to his ability to evoke through character and action the personal and social ramifications of a now out-moded belief in a providential cosmos,[3] then it seems reasonable to suggest that this particular novelistic line never before or again reached the heights of Fielding. But if, on the other hand, we take into account what Frank Kermode dismisses as "the purely technical virtues of [Fielding's] narrative",[4] we are confronted not only with a personal display of structural expertise, but also with a narrative coherence of enduring literary value.

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2 The Rise of the Novel, pp. 300 - 301. More recently (and, unfortunately, too late for the preparation of this study), Henry Knight Miller has argued in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and the Romance Tradition (Victoria, B. C.: University of Victoria, 1976) that, rather than being the first great novel, Tom Jones might better be seen as the last great romance.

3 See Martin C. Battestin, The Providence of Wit (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 141 - 163.

4 Frank Kermode, "Richardson and Fielding", Cambridge Journal, IV (1950), 107.

Kermode's questioning of the merit of Fielding's technical skill, and his championing of the moral worth of Richardson, who chose rather "to draw his breath in pain and tell the story",[5] brings us back to two issues crucial to an understanding of the strengths of the story-telling novelist. Kermode admits that, in comparison to Fielding's works, Richardson's are less accomplished and, significantly, less "readable".[6] Yet he also claims for Richardson the distinction of being able to tell a story from the heart, a claim which might lead us to expect from his simple, heart-felt tales all the compulsion and deep-seated attraction of the finest stories. But a good story requires, in fact, the exercise of a considerable art: its simplicity lies in the kinds of needs it meets, not in the demands of its form. Furthermore its success, whether it be judged in terms of morality or readability, lies not so much in the nature of the action comprising the story as in the persuasiveness of its structural logic. Richardson offers for our edification and enlightenment characters embroiled in an exemplary series of events which could conceivably have been taken as a piece from real life. But although, as Ford Madox Ford blithely informs us, life does not narrate,[7] there is a different

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5 "Richardson and Fielding", 114.

6 ibid., 114: ". . . one questions whether the value of [Fielding's] product - and by this is meant not its historical value or its readability but its essential moral value - is equivalent to that of a less accomplished, less urbane, less sociable, less witty writer, Richardson . . ."

7 Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance (1942; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1971), p. 192.

kind of edification and enlightenment to be had from those novelists who do. The technical accomplishment displayed by Fielding is not an incidental ornament but a fundamental prerequisite for a novelist seeking a specifically narrative coherence - the source of readability in its widest sense.

All this is not to deny what Kermode is arguing in a general sense: that is, that an over-riding concern with technique can be detrimental. But in a novel where this happens, it is not only the "essential moral value" of the work that suffers, but also its readability. John Barth's Chimera is arguably such a case, where the author might well be accused of allowing the "purely technical" aspects of his art to swamp his narrative.[8] But the limitations of this work are in marked contrast to Barth's achievement in The Sotweed Factor, or to John Fowles's in The French Lieutenant's Woman, two novels which, in their affectionate homage to the novel's past provide a concrete realization of the value of technical expertise. In retracing the novel's footsteps, Barth and Fowles revive not only the simple satisfactions of rumbustious plots and artful intrigue, but also the elemental compulsion of a good story, well told. Furthermore, in cultivating the technical virtues of narrative, they can, in a sense, be seen to be reviving the novel form itself, for if the

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8 Scheherezade and the Genie seem to be arguing in their author's defence when they comment that "Making love and telling stories both take more than good technique--but it's only the technique that we can talk about" (Chimera, pp. 31 - 32), but all three might well have taken a lesson from Tristram Shandy when he acknowledged that talking about love is not the same thing as making it (Tristram Shandy, IX, xviii, p. 603).

novel is to "die", it will surely not be by fostering readability, but by insisting on exclusively intellectual considerations as criteria for judgement. It is in the latter that the novel runs the risk of an untimely death, in uneven - and unwarranted - competition with the more abstract and precise formulations of ethics and philosophy.

Fielding's special contribution to the novel was a comprehensive design that integrated the emotional appeal of story-telling with the intellectual demands of a cohesive, morally significant plot, so that, in the words of his contemporary and associate Arthur Murphy, his work carried away "the envied praise of a complete performance".[9] His major concerns were not only embodied in the substance of the action, but were also defined and evaluated in terms of the structure of the narrative. In Joseph Andrews, for example, Joseph's growth from an innocent and at times tiresomely virtuous youth to tolerant, balanced adulthood is an understandable, though by no means inevitable, result of the worldly experience thrust upon him in his journey from London to the country. But on a deeper level, his development from the righteous youth who could coldly chastize Betty the chambermaid for her lack of modesty, even though she was in the heights of a swelling and enthusiastic passion, to the eager, tender lover of the last book requires more than an experience of the world. In the process of becoming a man, Joseph has to learn what it means to be human, and the double movement of the narrative structure provides in itself a subtle exploration of this main theme. While the progress of the

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9 The Lives of Henry Fielding and Samuel Johnson, p. 263.

plot, with its accumulating complications and unforeseen reversals, emphasizes man's mere humanity, the second movement in which the story engages us through our involvement with the characters celebrates that humanity and insists on balance and tolerance when assessing humanly relevant values.

This mutual interaction of independent structural rhythms may contribute little towards the establishment of formal realism, but it does provide a narrative framework which can cope with a world in which there is not one truth but many. In Jane Austen's Persuasion, for example, the plot, which teaches Anne the necessity for making her own decisions and taking deliberate steps to achieve what she desires, is undercut by the pattern of the story which bestows blessings that are, in all but an emotional sense, unearned. Captain Wentworth admits as much at the end when he observes, with a smile:

> "I must endeavour to subdue my mind to my fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve".[10]

But rather than avoiding the moral questions raised by the plot, the fulfilment of the story pattern ensures a more balanced appreciation of what are, in fact, only partial truths. Anne was "wrong" to sit back and indulge her memories of a lost love, but she was "right" to submit to the advice of Lady Russell, even though it was the "wrong" advice to give. And just as Anne was "right" in those actions she took to impress Wentworth with her continuing interest, Wentworth was

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10 Jane Austen, Persuasion (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1947), p. 249.

"wrong" in believing that her former action in yielding to Lady Russell was a sign of weakness, and that his own actions would earn him everything which was his due. There are limits to what a man may be expected to submit to, but there are also limits to what he can achieve by "honourable toil".[11] Not the least of the story's services is to dispel the illusion that, in life or in novels, action will always speak for itself.

It might be argued, however, that it is equally an illusion to trust in anything but honourable toil - whether we define this in terms of the characters' actions or the writer's attitude towards rational consistencies. The story which, against all odds, puts everything right in the end is arguably a deception more pernicious than the neatest, most simplistic logic of causes and consequences. In Dickens's Great Expectations, for example, Pip's deluded sense of destiny has its origins in his confidence in the validity of the story's logic. His illusion that he is a disguised prince in a fairy-tale is stripped from him by the revelation of the social realities imposed by the plot - a reality in which there are no clear-cut distinctions between villains and benefactors, and where heroes are not born but made by "honourable toil". Yet despite the happiness which Pip claims he has finally won through hard work and enterprise, he is surrounded at the end by a gloom which only begins to lift with the hint of that other story of which he might have been, or

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11 Persuasion, p. 249.

might still be, the hero. Whether we accept the original ending, in which Pip is left with the assurance only that suffering had given Estella "a heart to understand what my heart used to be", or the second ending, in which Pip sees "no shadow of another parting from her", we are left with the understanding that there is a greater truth beyond the proasic reality of Pip's current life, and beyond even the retreat into sentimentality looming in the second ending.[12]

The enticing charm of this other reality is perhaps sufficient justification for a novelist to pursue it, though there is another, more persuasive argument in his favour. Joseph's eventual marriage to Fanny, Anne's unexpectedly swift restoration to happiness, and Pip's recovery of at least the shadow of his dream may not be consistent with the tenor of the preceding action, but they are in keeping with our sympathy for the characters. They are judgements designed to satisfy not "a cold venal Advocate" but "one interested in the Event" (Tom Jones, V, iii; I, p. 222). And while it would be unrealistic to expect, and irresponsible of a novelist to suggest, that these judgements would apply to real life, the "essential moral value" of a fiction need not be restricted to the illustration of precepts in a representative action. By encouraging the reader to become involved in a story, by appealing to his compassion as well as to his sagacity, a novel such as Joseph Andrews or, more emphatically, Tom Jones can realize through its structure what an exasperated Amelia can only assert:

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12 Both endings are included in the Signet Classic edition of Great Expectations (London: The New English Library, 1963), p. 521.

> "I am a man myself, and my heart is interested in whatever can befall the rest of mankind. That is the sentiment of a good man, and whoever thinks otherwise is a bad one."[13] (Amelia, X, ix; II, p. 214)

There is no way of proving that "the reader" goes away from Joseph Andrews or Tom Jones with the conviction that tolerance and generosity should be the arbiters of specifically humane judgements. It can only be argued that these novels encourage such a reading - just as, it should be added, it can only be argued that a consideration of the plot of Tom Jones in isolation from the work as a whole encourages the conclusion to be drawn that we should "act with prudence in arriving at moral judgements".[14] But even if, in considering the emotional effects of novels, we can be accused by Wimsatt and Beardsley of moving yet another step away from the work itself "as an object of specifically critical judgement", we might still question the validity of regarding a work of literature simply as an object.[15] In one sense, a literary work does not exist until someone reads it, and reading, as Sterne so clearly demonstrates in Tristram Shandy, involves more than the exercise of those faculties which criticism as a discipline has come to value.

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13 The "sentiment", rendered into English for Amelia by Dr Harrison, was originally Terence's. It was a favourite quotation of Fielding's, translated again in The Covent-Garden Journal (25 February 1752), and also used to describe Tom Jones, who "was one who could truly say with him in Terence, Homo sum: Humani nihil a me alienum puto" (XV, viii, II, p. 815).

14 Irvin Ehrenpreis, Fielding: *Tom Jones*, p. 50.

15 "The Affective Fallacy", p. 21. Affective criticism is in fact enjoying a welcome revival under the influence of such critics as Stanley Fish.

A book, Tristram insists, most certainly is an object: it has pages that can be turned backwards and forwards, it has chapters that can be torn out, and it has substance enough to sit upon. But writing, "when properly managed, . . . is but a different name for conversation" (II, xi, p. 127), and reading is an activity in which a man needs to bring "one half of the entertainment along with him (VIII, xix, pp. 533 - 534). Tristram is not, however, a character accustomed to doing things by halves, and there are some readers who obviously feel that, in the division of labour in Tristram Shandy, he has left just a little too much to their imaginations: Tristram might well be a virtuoso story-teller, but Sterne is supposed to be the novelist, and in undermining the conventions of the novel - and in particular the convention that the reader is there, in the action, and not here, reading a book - he is testing the novel form to destruction.

Tristram Shandy is not the kind of novel that can easily be appealed to for support in a reasonable argument. Not only does it demonstrate that narrative is not meant to be a substitute for argument, but it also raises teasing questions about the extent to which we can find Sterne behind the mask of Tristram. On at least one point, however, Sterne, Tristram, and the narrative are consistent: that is, on the kind of understanding necessary in a reader of fiction. In probing the illusion of representational realism, in denying the reader a coherent plot, in denying him also the opportunity for "motive-mongering" by avoiding the subject altogether through the use of the hobby-horse, Sterne not only demonstrates what the novel can survive without, but also explores the nature of a narrative which

> will do all your hearts good----
> --And your heads too,--provided you
> understand it. (VI, xvii, p. 422)

Quite early in the novel Tristram observes that, between the heart and the brain, "there's often no good understanding" (IV, i, p. 275), a lament which Sterne was later to voice in a letter to an American admirer:

> There is so little true feeling in the herd of the world, that I wish I could have got an act of parliament, when [Tristram Shandy] appear'd, "that none but wise men should look into [it]." It is too much to write books and find heads to understand them.[16]

Understanding Tristram Shandy, then, requires a head that is not immune to the pleadings of "true feeling", and, as Sterne also makes clear, one that is not vulnerable to the excesses of a pathetic sensibility. Le Fever's story shows only too well that life will not always conform to emotional dictates, but on the other hand Slawkenbergius's Tale demonstrates the limitations of pure rationality. There is a fine balance sought, and, I would argue, achieved between the madness of the hard philosopher who loves only wisdom, and that of the "soft" fool who loves too well. Tristram tries to keep one foot in each of their worlds, and in the process risks a different kind of madness. His is a hazardous enterprise, with the dangers and the rewards perhaps foreshadowed in his very name: "Shandy" can mean either half-crazy or visionary,[17] and Tristram

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16 Letter to Dr John Eustace, Feb. 9, 1768, in Letters of Laurence Sterne, p. 411.

17 The Oxford English Dictionary, IX, p. 623: "Shandy, a. dial. Wild, boisterous; also visionary, empty-headed, half-crazy". An example cited suggests a Yorkshire usage.

does in fact verge on lunacy at times. But it is the wise Fool rather than the idiot clown who triumphs at the end of Tristram Shandy in a resolution in which there is a fine understanding between the head and the heart. As in all good stories which are well told, the story-teller and the reader can agree finally about the necessity for loving not only wisely but also very well.

A Selected Bibliography

This is a list of works which have proved helpful in writing this study. It is divided into four sections, the first listing primary sources to which I have referred in the text, the second dealing with the theoretical aspect, the third with the historical perspective, and the fourth with secondary sources relevant to Fielding and Sterne.

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