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Henry Fielding

Literary and Theological

Misplacement

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Abstract

This study is intended as a dialogue between literature and theology, utilizing selected works of the playwright and novelist, Henry Fielding (1707-54). While historical studies of Fielding have clearly yielded much of importance, a broader and less deterministic assessment concerning the latent ambivalences of this, one of the earliest novelists, has yet to be explored. Such an assessment has implications for the current relationship between, and the separate study of, literature and theology.

The methodology is informed by an awareness of human frailty (what Fielding described as HUMAN NATURE) and centres upon the use of a specific interpretative tool that I call *misplacement*. By this, I mean the continuous parting with the ineffable – the perpetual recognition that, in writing, there is always a sense of the other, be that an alternative path not taken, the nagging sense of the numinous, or the coming to terms with the ludicrous nature of the human condition. Such fragile, comedic alterity provides a weak metaphysical root which is shared by both literature and theology. To illustrate the effects of such misplacement, this thesis sets the novels of Henry Fielding alongside works of contemporary philosophical theology such as the post onto-theological critique of Gianni Vattimo and John Caputo, as well as alongside postmodern works of fiction, such as those of Vonnegut and Calvino. In so doing, common critical zones such as epistemology, ethics, mimesis, canonicity, and revelation are investigated. The result of this analysis is that, in all these areas, the novel form, in Fielding's hands, displays a powerful comic resonance with a theology which seeks to move beyond a strictly deterministic approach. Thus, we discover that Fielding's work, rather than simply being expressive of proto-Enlightenment principles, actually subverts those assumed securities regarding the status of the individual and his place in the world, before God.

In its conclusion, this study reveals the challenge of recognising the inescapably theological nature of the novel and that theology itself, is fictive. This assessment points to a greater need for further shared exploration of the relationship between theology and literature - to their mutual benefit.

To the memory of my father,
Robert Bain Robertson
(1936-2007)

I compared you with a little bird of the heavens, created for the pleasure of men and the adornment of nature. And then, Varenka, I thought that we too, people who live in care and worry, should also envy the carefree and innocent happiness of the birds of the heavens – well, and all the rest likewise, and the same; that is, I kept making such remote comparisons. I've got this book, Varenka, and it's got the same stuff in it, all the same things described in real detail. Why I'm writing is that there are different dreams, you know my dear. And now it's spring, so my ideas too are always so nice, sharp, inventive, and the dreams I have are tender; everything is rose-coloured. That's why I've written all this; but actually I got all this from the book.

<div align="right">Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Poor People</div>

'Tis better to write of laughter than of tears,
Since laughter is the property of Man.

<div align="right">Rabelais, Gargantua and Pantagruel</div>

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[*] "*Fielding, Henry*." Online Photograph. Britannica Student Encyclopædia. 12 June 2008
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Introduction

> He would […] reflect, in the manner that only literature and religion teach, on the puniness and nobility of mankind.[1]

Overture

In this study, my aim is to present a theological response to the issues raised by the literary form known as the novel, and specifically the fiction of Henry Fielding (1707-54). My argument is that the experience of the novel, which one scholar has described as Christianity's 'godchild'[2], offers an analogical route into that fragile literary space which both theology and fiction ultimately occupy. The recognition of being found in this communal space can, I suggest, serve to reinvigorate the integrity of a theology which has been hitherto compromised by the enticement of determinism – an enticement which can also bedevil the work of fiction.

The specific deterministic temptation, to which modern theology has succumbed, is that of closing off the questionable nature of human existence, chiefly by positing a Cartesian paradigm which elevates humanity to a reified place in which knowledge of God can be confidently appropriated.[3] The same temptation can be said to affect the study of the novel. The idea that the novel is, itself, the result and confirmation of the same Enlightenment thinking which affects theology, is an enduring one. The place of the individual as a primary focus in the rise of the novel has been an obvious and long-lasting sphere of exploration.

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[1] Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p. 93.

[2] Valentine Cunningham, 'The Novel and the Protestant Fix: Between Melancholy and Ecstasy', in *Biblical Religion and the Novel 1700-2000*, ed. by Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), p. 53.

[3] By the term 'determinism', I am recalling an enduring complaint in theological enquiry. For example, one can point to Schleiermacher's *On Religion* (1799) where, in contrast to those 'who have communicated their discoveries in a more delicate – be it also more fragile – form', he berates 'the schools, which are nothing but the habitations and nurseries of the dead letter'. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. by Richard Crouter, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 14. Such an emphasis on 'fragile form' resonates well with current approaches to theological endeavour as a 'weak' enterprise. See, for example, John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006).

However, this situation is now being challenged through the postmodern questioning of the subject. The confidence in the central position of humanity as supreme overlord which the Enlightenment project appeared to secure is, at this time, on the wane. This has inevitable implications for both theology and the novel. Indeed, as intellectual activities which gravitate around the fragile human subject, it may not be too much to say that their fortunes are closely intertwined. I suggest, then, that the novel, rising, as it were, on the wave of the Enlightenment, serves as the artistic concomitant of a similar development of theological thinking. The artistic and theological crises which centred upon the Enlightenment project actually produced the radical form known as the novel and, at the same time, provided the challenging environment for what we call modern theology.[4]

Similarly, I believe, we can argue that theological thinking, tried in the fires of the Enlightenment, paradoxically now faces a new crisis, namely the collapse of that self-same Enlightenment confidence. This crisis provides an opportunity for a hopeful re-examination of the relationship between literature and theology and, moreover, a moment to study the scope and influence of both, as artistic activities, sharing a common, fragile vision. Consequently, I wish to argue that the practice of theology is, in reality, a fictive exercise, while that of fiction is a deeply theological one.

Both fiction and theology share a number of fundamental structural and philosophical concerns. At the most basic level, both theology and fiction are modes of discourse, using words which, when released, inevitably constitute fictional and theological 'worlds'. As Vattimo puts it with respect to theological discourse, 'To profess faith in Christianity is first of all to profess faith in the inevitability of a certain textual tradition that has been passed down.'[5] In the same way, the novel has a certain canonicity of its own, which bespeaks of a discernable literary form. Each, then, has to adopt language in order to *become* what they are. Their mutual use of language, however, also serves as an immediate admission of the fragile nature of the discrete projects each purports to perform. This constitutive element in both theology and fiction serves as both their greatest strength and most obvious weakness.

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[4] George Newlands has argued that, in many respects, theology has, even now, not come to terms with the challenge of the Enlightenment. See his, *Theology of the Love of God* (London: Collins, 1980), p. 98.

[5] Gianni Vattimo, 'Toward a Nonreligious Christianity' in *After the Death of God*, ed. by Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 36.

Moving from the constitutive element of both theology and literature, to the focus of their inquiry, we see that theology's reliance on words to exercise its talk about God (*theo-logos*) can be regarded as analogous to the work of the novel in its task to point to 'another world'. In this sense, both theology and fiction, through language, point beyond themselves to 'the other'.

An immediate and shared consequence of this 'pointing to the other' is what I describe as 'parting with the ineffable'. Both fiction and theology attempt to articulate an understanding of 'the other'. In so doing, they inevitably fall prey to the temptation to domesticate that very otherness. What redeems both theology and fiction, however, is the awareness that their attempts at communication or understanding are infused by fragility. In their common task of communicating, there is the recognition that there is always more to be said. As Julian Barnes has it, 'Religion decays, the icon remains; a narrative is forgotten, yet its representation still magnetizes.'[6] In other words, in the exercise of theology and fiction, the parting with the ineffable, rather than a completed process, is better understood as a continually present withdrawal. Indeed, it is this continually present withdrawal which provides the hopeful space within which theology and fiction are best able to communicate together.

It is at this point where we recognise the contribution of comedy. For comedy, if nothing else, illustrates that the hopeful space is created in and through frailty. To this extent then, I am arguing that both fiction and theology are ultimately comic forms. Both theology and fiction exist, in a broad sense, to provide answers to the questions of existence. Such a lofty aspiration is, in reality, a futile one. Indeed, it is a desire that can only fail insofar as it is continually attempted. Such a description may, at first glance, appear as more a definition of tragedy than of comedy. However, the understanding of comedy that I offer in this study goes beyond the strict boundaries which have hitherto frequently prescribed both tragedy and comedy. As Terry Eagleton has pointed out:

> It is, in fact, oddly difficult to make grandly general propositions about
> tragedy without suddenly finding to one's embarrassment that they apply
> to comedy as well; and this duality may also be true of the modern
> subject, which is buoyantly comic in its look-no-hands ability to conjure

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[6] Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (London: Picador, 1990), p. 133.

itself up out of nothing at all, yet stricken for just the same reason with a sense of tragic solitude and futility. Both comedy and tragedy result from the fact that it is its own foundation.[7]

One can cite a supporting source for Eagleton's remarks in no less than Aristotle himself. In the *Poetics* the distinction between tragedy and comedy is a very precise one, as Golden argues:

> The essential difference between tragedy and comedy for Aristotle lies in the opposed kinds of character and action both represent, and not in the circumstance that one is allegedly serious and the other allegedly nonserious.[8]

What links tragedy and comedy is as important as what appears to distinguish them. Both, Aristotle tells us, 'developed from improvisations'.[9] Both are ultimately rooted in *mimesis*.[10] Both exhibit an analogous emotional response in relation to pity and fear.[11] Both share the same goal, namely the cathartic experience of the 'illumination of human action'.[12] It seems clear, then, that tragedy and comedy share a concern for the universality of human experience and, as consequence we must not be too quick to circumscribe either.

A theological example of this temptation to circumscription can be found in a discussion by Donald MacKinnon. He has helpfully drawn attention to the importance of the tragic element of the Christian message and particularly that surrounding the atonement. In so doing, he challenges the temptation to triumphalism which can bedevil this particular theological exploration. As he puts it, 'There is no escape from contingency.'[13] However, while in sympathy with MacKinnon's specific goal, my contention is that it is precisely the contingency that he describes as tragic which

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[7] Terry Eagleton, 'A Response', *Literature and Theology* Vol. 19, No. 2 (June 2005), 132-138 (p. 136).
[8] Leon Golden, *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1992), p. 67.
[9] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 3.3.8.
[10] Ibid., 3.4.9 and 4.2.11.
[11] Golden, pp. 91-97.
[12] Ibid., p. 72.
[13] Donald M. MacKinnon, 'Philosophy and Christology', in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, ed. by George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), p. 81. See also the comments of Kierkegaard in Chapter 2 (p. 95) on the relationship between comedy and tragedy.

actually forms the lifeblood of the comedic. In this sense, as I will argue in the course of this study, comedy itself is misplaced from any straight-forward deterministic understanding.

It is this misplaced background noise of futility and fragility which, I suggest, constitutes the comedy that is shared by both fiction and theology. Each, in a variety of modes and guises, recognises to a varying degree the inadequacy of its own projects but at the same moment seeks a control that its own fragile existence cannot provide.

More specifically, the work of Henry Fielding demonstrates that very capacity for fiction to undermine, or in my terms, *misplace* the apparent securities so beloved of determinists, both secular and religious. It is through the activity of comic *misplacement* that we discover, for example, that key areas such as art, epistemology, morality, theology and, of course, the presentation of reality itself, are put in question. Writing, as he was, at the advent of the Enlightenment, Fielding offers us the clearest example of the ability of comic fiction to confound the assumptions which that particular period set in motion.

I argue that, in his fiction, Fielding presents to us the waywardness of human experience, which is closely linked to a theology not bound by determinism. This is witnessed most clearly in both *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749) where there is, in the travel narrative, a literal sense of the convoluted journey made by the protagonists. Yet, that same waywardness is present and, in fact, to a more disturbing degree, in Fielding's last novel, *Amelia* (1752). In this way, I will argue that the novel, in Fielding's hands, rather than being in the vanguard of modernity, is itself misplaced, insofar as it shares the hallmarks of postmodernism.

As a result, theological reflection can only but gain from an examination of just how comic misplacement operates in his hands. Above all, it will recognise, as Fielding does, the need for a sense of humility and a sense of humour in the face of human frailty.

Dialogue, Compassion and Unknowing:

Marking the Theological and Literary Terrain

Fifty years ago, Amos Wilder described what he saw as the 'historic divorce' or the 'cleavage between religion and the arts'.[14] More recently, and in a similar vein, John Coulson has written:

> The mutual dependence of religious awareness and imagination is recognized for what it is only as each begins to go its own way. This […] has had disastrous consequences for religion.[15]

Though numerous important works investigating the philosophical and artistic connections between literature and theology have appeared since Wilder and, especially, Coulson wrote, the relationship between the disciplines remains a complicated one.[16] For example, in the recently published *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*,[17] the size of the type face given to the word 'Theology' on the front cover led to some heart searching as to whether this was indicative of an unjustifiable claim to a superior status! Though undoubtedly a matter of amusement, lurking behind such frivolity a nervous tension remains. The tension is partly determined by socio-historical circumstances. The study of English Literature has come late to the Academy, while Theology, long regarded as the so-called Queen of the Sciences has a rich and ancient pedigree. Time can heal, but it can also wound. And so, curiously, the difficulties that English Literature experienced in finding an intellectual home are now being visited upon Theology, at least in the United Kingdom. With ever-diminishing congregations leading to a less secure ecclesiastical footing in society, the place of theology as a meaningful discipline with anything

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[14] Amos Wilder, *Theology and Modern Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp.14-15.

[15] John Coulson, *Religion and Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 3.

[16] I am referring, for example, to works such as Nathan Scott's *The Broken Center* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1966), Northrop Frye's *The Great Code* (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1982), Michael Edwards' *Towards a Christian Poetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984), Stephen Prickett's *Words and The Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and David Jasper's *The New Testament and the Literary Imagination* (London: Macmillan, 1987). There are, of course, numerous critics and philosophers who share an interest in matters theological such as George Steiner, Frank Kermode, Bernard Williams, D. Z. Phillips and Paul Ricoeur.

[17] Andrew Hass, David Jasper, Elisabeth Jay, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

practical to offer, is now an active matter of debate. And this debate is taking place *within* the theological community itself.

Part of this discussion that I personally believe to be a vital component, is the discernment of a renewal of the interdisciplinary nature of a subject which, for centuries, though clearly dependent to a large extent upon other disciplines, has found itself, wittingly or otherwise, retreating from just such an interdisciplinary stance. Once again, one can appeal to socio-historical circumstances that may mitigate this retreat. One can cite the reformists' zeal for a pure religion which distances itself from the image, and therefore from art in general. One can point to the aggresive piety of the puritans in their suspicion of anything remotely resembling levity or, later, the Victorian religio-morality which confined artistic expression. More recently, we could cite the Barthian neo-orthodoxy which sought to overturn what Barth saw as the prevailing weakness of liberal theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is nowhere better exemplified than in his *Epistle to the Romans* (1918) where, in the second edition, Barth criticises those commentaries which appear 'merely the first step towards a commentary'.[18] In so saying, he seeks to place the so-called scientific school of interpretation in its proper dialectical context. Useful though philological and archaeological and other historical research may be, it cannot be of sufficient aid in Barth's concern over 'the true nature of interpretation'. This is to be found in the crisis of the human condition, located between infinity and temporality:

> 'God is in heaven, and thou art on earth.' The relation between such a God
> and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is
> for me, the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy.[19]

The dialectic between God and man with Christ as the supreme event becomes, for Barth, the focus of our critical understanding, with all ancillary disciplines, at the very most, bowing the knee to this hermeneutical focus.

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[18] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by Sir Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 6.
[19] Ibid., p. 10.

Of course, in our own day, as we have noted, the decline of the socio-political standing of the church, at least in the west, can lead to a threat to any broad-based theological approach. Any institution which finds itself on the back foot is understandably tempted to adopt a more defensive, reactionary stance. One need only take a cursory glance at the output from certain religious broadcasters to recognise the paucity of any meaningful engagement with the real world, let alone with any cultural component of that world.

In an attempt to counter such solipsism, Graham Ward argues, however, that transgressing boundaries is indeed the *raison d'être* of theology.[20] It cannot exist without the other. Or, as George Newlands has it, 'Creative theology comes from new combinations rather than standing in entrenched positions.'[21]

The recognition that our world is ever-shrinking and that hitherto secure intellectual boundaries are, if not under threat, certainly less capable of remaining rigid, behoves all in the intellectual community to increasingly 'bear with one another' in a way that was probably never anticipated by those active at the cusp of the Enlightenment. The rapid intellectual expansion which marked the long eighteenth century coincidentally provided us with the fragmentation of those philosophical ties which had bound the arts and sciences to a more secure, unified vision. While many may celebrate that such secure boundaries which existed, after all, as little more than a political fiction, were at last crumbling, others have been left uneasy over the results of the drive to our modern world. Current political and theological tensions which threaten not only ecclesial structures, but the very fabric of our society can arguably be seen as a symptom of an increasingly fractured world – a world where dialogue is sacrificed on the altar of deterministic rhetoric and a desire for hegemony.

As a result, there are calls for a renewed mode of thinking which cuts across religious, cultural and political barriers. One popular contemporary attempt at such a renewal is to be found in Christopher Hitchens's recent polemical *God Is Not Great* (2007) where, in his concluding beatific vision, we read:

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[20] Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), p.ix.
[21] Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God*, p. 62.

Above all, we are in need of a new Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man and woman. This Enlightenment will not need to depend, like its predecessors, on the heroic breakthroughs of a few gifted and exceptionally courageous people. It is within the compass of the average person. The study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake and for the ethical questions with which it deals, can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected. The pursuit of unfettered scientific enquiry, and the availability of new findings to masses of people by easy electronic means, will revolutionize our concepts of research and development. Very importantly, the divorce between the sexual life and fear, and the sexual life and disease, and the sexual life and tyranny, can now at last be attempted, on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse. And all this and more is, for the first time in our history, within the reach, if not the grasp of everyone.[22]

What is remarkable about this passage is, firstly, the profoundly (some may say overbearingly) optimistic tone. It appears to Hitchens that if we all would simply just get along, everything – science, commerce, politics, ethics – everything that concerns the human enterprise is resolvable in his grand unified panacea. Surely we have heard this kind of rhetoric before? Indeed, it is not difficult to make the case that Hitchens's solution smacks of the very imperialistic attitude he seeks to condemn in the religions which, in his opinion, 'poison everything'.[23] Moreover, Hitchens's presupposition that the Enlightenment itself provided the unalloyed, progressive surge he wishes to be replayed, is clearly a matter of some debate. One notable example in this respect would be the infamous footnote to David Hume's essay, *Of National Characters*:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other

[22] Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 283.
[23] Ibid., p. 13.

hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.[24]

That Hume later revised these comments does not belittle their importance and, indeed, it has been argued that the revision itself served to strengthen his already established racist position:

The fact that Hume revised the note […] proves that Hume's racism was deliberate rather than casual. The revision proves that Hume did seriously consider objections to his racist position. His response, however, was to sharpen his attack on blacks further. His racism should thus be read as something he was willing to defend, rather than as an offhand remark.[25]

We must, therefore, be cautious in bestowing an unqualified approbation upon every aspect of the Enlightenment project.[26] Indeed, one can point to yet another even more strident polemic, John Gray's recent *Black Mass* (2008) where he argues apparently *contra* Hitchens that 'the Enlightenment ideologies of the past centuries were very

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[24] David Hume, 'Of National Characters' in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. by Eugene F. Miller, rev. edn. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987), p. 208.

[25] John Immerwahr, 'Hume's Revised Racism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 53, No. 3. (Jul. - Sep., 1992), 481-486.

[26] There is evidence of racism, too, in Kant, in his early work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764). Chief among a number of critical accounts of an Enlightenment tendency toward a more general absolutism is Max Horkheimer's & Theodore Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

largely spilt theology'.[27] In other words, the Enlightenment project itself can be regarded, he argues, as a quasi-religious phenomenon that could never ultimately succeed.

The second and more specific point of interest for our purposes lies in Hitchens's assessment of the responsibility of literature. Literature, it would seem, is to lay the axe to the neck of Queen Theology, or at least Mother Church. Literature is seen as the benign executioner of religion insofar as it serves to usurp the illegitimate monarch of darkness and dogma and usher in an era of light and truth. Though in broad sympathy with his contention that literature and poetry have much to offer (one would have to be a book burner not to be), it is surely too much to suggest that literature act as the judge and executioner of religion which, in the case of Christianity, is itself founded upon literary texts. Christianity is a religion of the book. Hitchens's fundamental position is exposed at this point – he wants to be left alone. He wants to be in his small corner and religion, if it must carry on at all, in an equally small corner somewhere far, far away. But, as we have already noted, that is something that theology, if it is to function in a meaningful way as the intellectual enterprise borne out of religious reflection, simply cannot do – not because it necessarily seeks to dominate (though it has tried hard enough over the centuries) but because theology, like literature, remains a human discourse which cannot be wished away.

The atmosphere, then, is not an easy one for relevant and enlightened inter-disciplinary communication. Tensions clearly do exist. The rise of literary criticism, Terry Eagleton informs us, was due to the failure of the church.[28] Such an assessment is not likely to harmonize well with, for example, the theological 'reaction' known as Radical Orthodoxy. This particular approach can be regarded as representative of that same desire, outlined above, to restore the fortunes of theology within the Academy. What is curious, however, is that the theological framework brought to bear in order to achieve this restoration, appears somewhat at odds with the kind of rapprochement

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[27] John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 2.
[28] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 20.

I have sought to outline above and, indeed, to such an extent that Radical Orthodoxy becomes an unwitting theological counterpart to the new atheism of Hitchens.

This temptation toward hegemony is precisely Steven Shakespeare's chief concern with the approach of Radical Orthodoxy. He argues that, in its, no doubt noble, desire to reinstate theology to a place of eminence in the Academy, it unfortunately presents itself as authoritarian and unwilling to accommodate itself to the wider world. Shakespeare defines his criticism thus: 'Neither the Christian story, nor the ways in which that story is articulated through doctrine, can be sealed off from other stories, theories and discourses.'[29] However, it appears the Church, for Radical Orthodoxy's champions, cannot be gainsaid. They do not go so far as to describe it as infallible, (mainly because it is unclear exactly what is meant by 'Church') but in their push to recharge the failing theological batteries of an institution bedevilled by the competing voices thrown up by secularism, they, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately, find themselves speaking with an imperious tone. This is ironic because it is the power of the secular (or the pagan, as it is sometimes described) which Radical Orthodoxy claims to seek to disarm. Quoting Althaus-Reid, Shakespeare reinforces this particular charge:

> Liberation theology takes account of the fragility of God in history, while radical orthodoxy seems to have a God-ideal, outside failures and plateaus of destitution.[30]

Shakespeare's assessment is that, in the agenda of Radical Orthodoxy, one power broker has been exchanged for another. The proponents of Radical Orthodoxy have failed to recognise what David Klemm describes as 'the fatal flaw for theology today', namely 'the failure to recognise the tragic defeat in the cultural domain of truth by power'.[31] This exchange that Shakespeare alludes to comes about because there can be no rapprochement between theology and the secular world. There are two different languages that are being spoken and only one can ultimately speak for God.

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[29] Stephen Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 173.
[30] Ibid., p. 159.
[31] David Klemm, 'Back to Literature – and Theology?', in *Postmodernism, Literature and the Future of Theology*, ed. by David Jasper (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), p. 182.

And it is this latter point – the claim to speak authoritatively and exclusively for God – which leads to the charge of solipsism, a church existing only and for itself.

More positively, towards the end of his study, Shakespeare provides his own broad canvas upon which the future of theological studies might be painted. Having wrestled with the tensions which appear endemic in the Radical Orthodoxy schema, Shakespeare states:

> Dialogue, Compassion and Unknowing might be the three marks of a theology to come, because they are also ancient and woven into the texts of Christian theology and the textures of Christian experience.[32]

As a consequence, instead of speaking univocally, theology must be carried out in dialogue. Instead of the apparent isolationism of the theological project as witnessed in Radical Orthodoxy, the theological task is to be carried out, not only with an acute awareness of the needs of the wider world, but with an active, compassionate engagement with it. Lastly, instead of an overbearing sense of its own importance and uniqueness of vision, the future theology must recognize its own epistemological frailty and operate within a more humble framework.

What is striking about Shakespeare's 'marks' is how they resonate with the nature and activity of the novel form. The same marks of dialogue, compassion and unknowing can be found in this, the most accessible and, despite the numerous prophetic calls concerning its imminent demise, enduring works of art. Take, for example, the keen insights of the novelist and critic, Milan Kundera. In his assessment of the fate of the hero in the novel form he concludes:

> Don Quixote is conquered. And with no grandeur whatever. For it is clear immediately: human life as such is a defeat. All we can do in the face of that ineluctable defeat called life is to try to understand it. That – that is the *raison d'être* of the art of the novel.[33]

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[32] Shakepeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, p. 180.
[33] Milan Kundera, *The Curtain*, trans. by Linda Asher (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 10.

While one may wish to argue philosophical semantics with Kundera regarding the nature and extent of the defeat faced by humanity, what is undoubtedly clear is his sense of humility in the face of the human condition, and that the novelist's task is to seek in some small but vital way to come to terms with that state of affairs. Kundera, in my view, succeeds here where the Radical Orthodox theologians have failed. He recognizes the frailty of the human project. And it is frailty which serves as the emotional, epistemological and artistic backcloth for all that follows in this study.

Without the sense of frailty, the work of art is but an ornament for display. Without the sense of frailty, the artist is but another voice clamouring for attention in the marketplace of competing voices. Without the sense of frailty the spiritual connections that art strives, however fleetingly, to supply, are lost in the chaos of the humdrum and banal.

The same can be said for theology. Without the sense of frailty, theology merely attracts the dust of history with no living testimony to communicate. Without the sense of frailty, the theologian becomes a clanging cymbal, occasionally resonating, but more usually clashing, with the rest of the human orchestra. Without the sense of frailty, the spiritual connections so often claimed are dissolved into an esoteric language which serves no-one.

Such a relationship, rooted as it is in frailty, can be regarded as a practical interdisciplinary outworking of Vattimo's concern to offer a 'weakening of Being', that is, the recognition that 'reality is "reduced" to the conflict or play of interpretation'.[34] Such an understanding shares much in common with Derrida's appreciation of play as 'the disruption of presence'.[35] Vattimo is concerned to show that such a play or conflict must inevitably cross cultural boundaries. His disavowal of a metaphysics of presence and his adoption of what he describes as an 'ontological hermeneutics' leads Vattimo to not only question the philosophical basis of atheism, but also the status and activity of theology. Both are tempted by the same misunderstanding of Being and, as a result, find themselves unable to communicate

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[34] Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. by Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 51.
[35] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 369.

meaningfully with one another – bound as they are by their own disciplinary boundaries which are themselves sustained by a mutual adherence to a metaphysics of presence. Vattimo, with his 'weakening of Being', opens the door, as it were, to a mutual surrender to the play of interpretation. Such a surrender, he argues, asks searching questions regarding the boundaries that have hitherto been set in place to define and separate cultural disciplines, theology and literature included:

> The fact is that it seems difficult to bring the issue to closure within such restricted and precise (disciplinary) boundaries. Is ours a "religion of the Book", which we will leave eventually behind through the irresistible process of secularization? Or, more important, do we belong to a culture or civilization of the Book that still affects us deeply, even when we think, or might think, that we no longer have anything in common with the religion of the Book? Does this culture or civilization of the Book not have any relation – at the same time both vague and deep – with the religion of the Book, so much so that it becomes difficult to confine our "history of interpretation" to the history of the interpretation of Scripture?[36]

Vattimo's notion of a weakened ontology, or more accurately, an ontological hermeneutics, paves the way for us to recognise the mutual frailty which constitutes both theology and literature. Each can be of service to the other only when such mutual frailty is discerned.

Literature generally, and the novel in particular, rather than adopting the judgmental role that Hitchens envisions, becomes instead a fragile bearer of meaning. As such it can, I believe, serve as a cultural partner to more persuasively achieve at least one of the stated aims of Radical Orthodoxy, namely the reinstatement of theology as a serious player in the Academy. This reinstatement cannot be at the expense of other disciplines. Indeed, the mark of this study is to reinforce the lines of communication between the arts and theology, and chiefly in the relationship between the novel and

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[36] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, p. 61.

what I describe as a new, frail dogmatics. At all times the temptation toward cultural hegemony must be resisted.

It is here, of course, that we are faced with the question of the metanarrative. Is the rapprochement I am seeking, between theology and the novel, nothing more than a shadowy attempt to sneak in by the back door simply one more grand unified and, by extension, uncritical vision of reality? Certainly the idea of metanarrative has, since Lyotard, lost much of its currency. For the postmodernist, notions of an overriding, universal human experience which transcends the immediate text are, in reality, regarded as representative of nothing more than politically interested rhetoric. There are doubtless advantages to be had in the dismantling of such an idealistic schema, not least the exposure of illegitimate hermeneutical strategies which serve only to preserve an idiosyncratic ideological agenda.[37]

However, it seems to me that there is, when one attempts to engage in any kind of meaningful dialogue between literature and theology, an unavoidable exposure to metanarrative. We are inevitably forced to ask fundamental and uncomfortable questions. Can literature, with all its hermeneutic potentiality sit comfortably with the metaphysical and dogmatic baggage that theology brings in its wake? The risk is that, paradoxically, the potentially fruitful interaction between theology (negatively characterised as a dogmatic metaphysics) and literature (whose leitmotiv comprises both freedom and frailty) is compromised by an equally dogmatic set of philosophical presuppositions which preclude the oil of literature mixing with the water of theology.[38] This study serves to provide, at least, a means to expose the prejudicial tendencies which exist in both disciplines. Any meaningful rapprochement between theology and literature, then, must reflect a willingness to, in Eagleton's terms, 'transgress discursive boundaries'.[39]

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[37] See, for example, Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), chs. 1 & 3.

[38] On this particular tension see T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988), chapter 1.

[39] Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 83.

Terry Eagleton, himself, has recently noted that the assumption of literary theory as a more-or-less secure cultural discipline in its own right has, in the light of current socio-political shifts, found itself questioned. He recognises that 'we need to imagine new forms of belonging, which in our world are bound to be multiple rather than monolithic'.[40] This, once again, seems a distance away from Hitchens's 'literature as judge' approach. Indeed, Eagleton goes further and, echoing Ward's remarks above, appears to recognise that the camp of literary studies needs to find its own cultural partners:

> To be inside and outside a position at the same time – to occupy a territory while loitering sceptically on the boundary – is often where the most intensely creative ideas stem from.[41]

George Steiner, adopting a more quasi-metaphysical position, argues that 'there is language, there is art, because there is 'the other''.[42] That there is an audience for art, or, to put it in Wittgensteinian parlance, the fact that there is no such thing as private language, leads us remorselessly away from solipsism. Even the desire to hide one's art is only conceivable through the awareness that there is another from whom the work of art is to be concealed. As Steiner puts it:

> It is because the claims of the other's presence reach so deeply into the final precincts of aloneness that a creator may, in circumstances of extremity, seek to guard for himself or for willed oblivion what are, ineluctably, acts of communication and trials of encounter.[43]

What Steiner has helpfully pointed to here is a kind of artistic separation-anxiety which inheres in all art. The creation stands alone and yet it is created to be, in some sense, communicated to another. The work of art in this sense lies in a curious no-

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[40] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 21.
[41] Ibid., p. 40.
[42] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 137.
[43] Ibid., p. 137.

man's land, both solitary and in communion. It is a thing in itself, and yet as Heidegger well knew, it is something more.

Similarly, in the *Oxford Handbook* mentioned earlier, Elisabeth Jay recognises the necessity of a corresponding geographical ambivalence on the part of theology, when she states:

> If 'Theology' can be translated as 'discourse about God' this begs a number of questions as to what kind of 'God-talk' is permitted or implied, and who, at any particular time, is entitled to do the talking.[44]

There is, then, between theology and literature a shared epistemological anxiety or frailty. In the light of this, then, we are forced to ask: if there can be some kind of rapprochement between literature and theology, what form would it take, and how would it come about? As we have already hinted in our aversion to any form of cultural hegemony, it is clear that we must be careful not to fall into the trap of confusing the novel and theology. There are indeed two distinct narrative voices which are in play in this study. It is how these voices interact with one another which forms the key to any kind of potentially fruitful communion.

In this regard, Stanley Fish has informed us that such a 'pure' interdisciplinary approach 'is more than hard to do; it is impossible to do'.[45] This is a necessary corrective in that it exposes those very perspectives and prejudices that one cannot but bring along from one discipline in an attempt to engage with another. As he puts it, we have to face the fact of 'the unavailability of a perspective that is not culturally determined'.[46] Paul Ricoeur makes much the same point, and indeed goes further, with his important hermeneutical notion of 'distantiation' which, as Kearney claims, 'demonstrates that understanding always labours within the historical horizon of an intersubjective communication where we interpret meanings that have been

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[44] Elisabeth Jay, '"Now and in England"', in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, p. 4.
[45] Stanley Fish, 'Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard To Do', in *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing Too* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 237-8.
[46] Ibid., p. 238.

'distantiated' from subjective consciousness.'[47] In other words, for Ricoeur, not only is interdisciplinary activity hard to do, the act of interpretation itself cannot be guided by some overarching transcendental subjective ego.

Clearly then, there are methodological difficulties when it comes to any kind of meaningful interaction. Interdisciplinarity at all times threatens to become a practical expression of the myth of Sisyphus. However, one cannot allow the potential hazards to overwhelm any attempt towards meaningful dialogue. It is enough to be aware of them and, in that awareness, to forge some kind of mutually beneficial contact. Indeed, I would suggest along with Fish, that this awareness borne out of frailty is the only context within which there can be any meaningful struggle for epistemological coherence. As Fish, himself, states:

> It is only because we cannot achieve an 'authentic critique' – a critique free from any political or conceptual entanglements – that the critiques we do achieve have their force, even if it is the nature of things for the forces of those critiques to be as vulnerable and as transient as the conditions that give them form.[48]

Additionally, we must emphasise that, in this dialogue born out of frailty, the mutual use of the imagination to both literature and theology. As Gordon Kaufmann has it:

> The proper business of theology (theos-*logos*) is the analysis, criticism and reconstruction of the image/concept of God, therefore theology is (and always has been) essentially an activity of imaginative construction.[49]

The use of the imagination has a chequered history in theological circles. Human fancy, one assumes, could lead to any number of heterodox positions. St. Paul graphically illustrates this for us when he writes to Timothy:

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[47] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005), p. 31.
[48] Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing Too*, p. 242.
[49] Gordon D. Kaufman, 'Theology as Imaginative Construction', *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 50, No. 1 (Mar., 1982), 73-79.

> The Spirit says expressly that in after times some will desert from the faith and give their minds to subversive doctrines inspired by devils, through the specious falsehoods of men whose own conscience is branded with the devil's sign.[50]

Aquinas, more specifically, as one might imagine, focussed this anxiety when he observed that imagination makes 'everything other than it is'.[51] The sense that imagination was in some sense a maverick faculty persisted, as we shall see later, into Fielding's day, colouring much of the criticism of the period. And it is fair to suggest that the suspicion of imagination has not entirely left our cultural subconscious. For example, the analyses of the work of art by continental thinkers such as Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, have left many uneasy as to the possibility of reaching any general sense of the meaning of art beyond a poststructuralist abandonment of the subject and its consequent adoption of the troublesome hermeneutic of a never-ending play of signs. However, it is the contention of this study that, despite (and possibly because of) the risks, imagination in the context of human frailty offers us a means to forging a constructive dialogue.

Paradoxically, another continental thinker, Julia Kristeva, can be of assistance in this regard. Known for her thesis of the melancholic imagination which finds its roots in a bleak awareness of the separation of the individual from the other, Kristeva does explore the possibility of approaching the imagination from another, more hopeful angle – that of an imagination rooted in the comedic. Kearney, on Kristeva's behalf, asks the question, 'Is it possible that our post-modern culture might produce works capable of engendering in us a new *imaginaire de la comédie*?'[52] The motive behind such a question is found in her desire to overcome the alienation Kristeva believes to have blighted much of our post-war existence. The joyful potential of play with the other becomes, for her, a key component in a recovered hermeneutic of love. In other words, comedy and play become the means by which alienation is overcome.

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[50] 1 Timothy 4:1. (New English Bible).
[51] Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 3.
[52] Ibid., p. 200.

This, in essence, and returning to Shakespeare's three 'marks', is what I am offering in this study, namely a theology which is in dialogue with the novel, a theology which learns from the compassion of the novel, and a theology which sees in the novel a partner in the 'understanding of life' as envisioned by Kundera. The novelist who himself saw his work as precisely this 'understanding of life', and whose work will form the focus of our study is Henry Fielding.

Why Fielding?

There are a number of reasons for selecting Henry Fielding as the focus for this study. Firstly, and as we shall shortly examine in more detail, Fielding can be broadly regarded as one of the pioneers of the art form we have come to know as the novel.[53] Beyond such temporal priority, this historical dimension has a number of facets, not least Fielding's handling of the theological and ethical concerns of a period of particular theological and philosophical ferment.

Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, Fielding has left us with, not only his fiction, but at the same time his own idiosyncratic interpretation of that fiction. He is the most self-conscious of the early exponents of the novel form, providing us with, even as he rides along with either Abraham Adams or Tom Jones, a critical analysis of what he believes he is doing in writing. As such, he offers us considerable insight into the relationship between, amongst other things, theology and literature.

Lastly, Fielding is a comic writer. The 'ridiculous' forms a large part of Fielding's literary focus and for our purposes provides an excellent example of the way in which human frailty can become a means by which theology and literature can serve one another. Even in his last major work, the darker *Amelia*, bears witness to this self-same human frailty.

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[53] There are, of course, a number who dispute this claim and who, somewhat pedantically, wish to regard almost every work of fiction ever produced as somehow 'novel'. What is clear is that, like any other art form, the novel did indeed have literary precursors who shared with the new genre stylistic similarities of plot and characterisation. For one of the recent dissenting voices see Margaret Doody, *The True History of the Novel* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

I therefore intend to show that, in his fiction, Fielding offers us a way in to the cultural space that Ward and others have described. This 'way in' is not intended as a monolithic hermeneutical tool which serves to close off any other interpretative route. Rather, it forms my own idiosyncratic avenue through which we can rediscover the strong connections between theology and the arts, and literature in particular. This idiosyncrasy forms a vital component in this study as its overarching hermeneutical horizon is that of human fragility. In this respect, human frailty can be regarded as a cultural catalyst towards a greater understanding between theology and literature. The fiction of Henry Fielding, as we shall see, provides us with ample evidence of his awareness that both literature and theology are bonded by the ludicrous nature of the human condition. It is with this in mind, then, that we seek to explore what I have called literary and theological *misplacement* – a term which we shall examine more closely in due course, but which, at this stage, we have broadly defined as a parting with the ineffable.

Such misplacement is illustrated for us in a number of ways in Fielding's fiction. We shall examine in turn the epistemological framework of Fielding's fiction, the nature of the comedic form in his hands, the creative act and its relationship to criticism and blasphemy, particular ethical and theological issues which pertain in Fielding's fiction, i.e. virtue, providence and justice and, finally, Fielding's understanding of mimesis, canon and revelation. Each area, as I hope to show, serves to reinforce the connections between literature and theology in such a way as to recognise the mutual frailty through which both exercise their artistic activity.

At the outset, however, it is important to make clear that we will not be bound by a purely forensic or historical assessment of Fielding's fiction.[54] The scope of this study is necessarily wide-ranging, involving as it does the disciplines of theology and philosophy as well as literary studies. I hope, however, in this wide exploration, not to dilute the distinctive part each has to play but, rather to enhance each of their roles in their mutual service of the pursuit towards a greater understanding between theology and literature. So, in pursuit of our goal of a rapprochement between literature and theology, we will set in close proximity Fielding scholars such as Battestin and

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[54] See Chapter 1.

Paulson and philosophers and theorists such as Heidegger, Derrida and Vattimo, as well as theologians like Ward and Caputo. In addition, we will have occasion to compare Fielding's fiction with that of authors such as Murdoch, Vonnegut and Calvino. These seemingly unlikely partnerships, I believe, serve to show the capacity for Fielding's fiction to provide for us the perfect example of a kaleidoscopic cultural space wherein both literature and theology can more freely communicate.

Italo Calvino, himself, (though speaking in the context of the relationship between philosophy and literature) summarises well the tension and any potential resolution between the two disciplines of literature and theology when he states:

> And so the wrangle goes on, with each side confident of having taken a step ahead in the conquest of truth, or at least of *a* truth, and at the same time perfectly well aware that the raw material of its own constructions is the same as that of the opposition: words. But words, like crystals, have facets and axes of rotation with different properties, and light is refracted differently according to how these word crystals are placed, and how the polarizing surfaces are cut and superimposed. The clash between philosophy and literature does not need to be resolved. On the contrary, only if we think of it as permanent but ever new does it guarantee us that the sclerosis of words will not close over us like a sheet of ice.[55]

This unresolvability, which Calvino suggestively describes, provides for us a useful launch point for our present discussion. Calvino's assessment, at one level, may appear somewhat fatalistic – we have to live with the tension. But that, he says, is the way to contend with tension. Removing the tension between disciplines is, in many respects, no more an option than removing liquid from water – it goes with the territory. However, these territories can find themselves transformed from within in such a way that communication between literature and theology becomes, not only desirable, but vital to both camps. Such a re-visioning can be painful as well-loved securities are challenged, but the resulting fruitful dialogue ought to be well worth the struggle. Each partner – theology and literature - can engage on a common journey to

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[55] Italo Calvino, 'Philosophy and Literature', in *The Literature Machine*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Secker & Warburg, 1987), p. 40.

a common, though insecure, space. Being found in that space, each is thus given room to breathe a different air - and thereby be of service to the other in way which does no violence to the integrity of either. And, as Calvino tells us, the prism of words will guide our colourful steps.

Chapter One

History, Hiddenness and Misplacement

The Historical Constriction of Henry Fielding

> One evening there came into his soul the desire to fashion an image of *The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment*. And he went forth into the world to look for bronze. For he could only think in bronze.
>
> But all the bronze of the whole world had disappeared, nor anywhere in the whole world was there any bronze to be found, save only of the image of *The Sorrow that endureth for Ever*.
>
> Now this image, he himself, and with his own hands, fashioned, and had set it on the tomb of the one thing he had loved in life. On the tomb of the dead thing he had loved he had set this image of his own fashioning, that it might serve as a sign of the love of man that dieth not, and a symbol of the sorrow of man that endureth for ever. And in the whole world there was no other bronze save the bronze of this image.
>
> And he took the image he had fashioned, and set it in a great furnace, and gave it to the fire.
>
> And out of the bronze of the image of *The Sorrow that endureth for Ever* he fashioned an image of *The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment*.[56]

The above is an example of what Oscar Wilde termed 'Poems in Prose', a form that utilizes poetic intensity without adopting conventional structure such as metrical or stanzaic patterns. Baudelaire appears to have been Wilde's chief influence in this regard. The form itself, Isobel Murray informs us, did not gain in popularity, and remained, it would appear, the aesthetic choice of those disenchanted with, amongst

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[56] Oscar Wilde, *The Artist* in *Complete Shorter Fiction,* ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 253.

other things, the neo-classical rules which governed various genres. It remained the preference of radicals.

I mention this as an introduction to Henry Fielding, who, though by no means a political, or indeed, broadly speaking, aesthetic radical, did introduce to us what he described as his 'comic epic poem-in-prose', that somewhat clumsy catch-all term which has come down to us as the precursor of the modern and dominant literary term, 'the novel'. As I hinted at in the Introduction, much ink has been spent on the extent to which one can legitimately place Fielding at the vanguard of novelistic history.[57] Since Ian Watt's hugely influential study *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), there has been a succession of studies either broadly affirming or sharply criticizing Watt's main thesis, namely that the success of the genre depended chiefly in its being placed specifically in a socio-historical milieu which increasingly provided opportunity for individual development. The novel, for Watt, becomes, as he put it in a later work, a 'myth of individualism'.[58]

Without entering into the complexities of the historical debate as to the origin of the novel, it seems clear enough that Watt recognised correctly (and, one has to admit, obviously) that the significant key to the success of the novel is precisely this individualistic component. More communal aesthetic productions, i.e. the drama, were, with the rise of print culture, open to what amounted to an economic as well as an aesthetic challenge. Political events, such as Walpole's Licensing Act of 1737 (which had a direct detrimental effect on Fielding as a hitherto successful theatrical writer/producer), were to further interiorize the artistic sensibilities. Within this cultural space the novel found a home, and Fielding was one of the first to move in.

However, it would be a mistake to ground the success of the novel in purely Marxist terms. The novel itself transcends those socio-historical boundaries which, at first sight, seem to constrain it. I find myself in agreement with Iris Murdoch who argues that 'nothing is more paralysing than a sense of historical perspective, especially in

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[57] There are those who argue, for example, that the novel as we understand it only came into being in the nineteenth century. See Homer Obed Brown, *Institutions of the English Novel: From Defoe to Scott* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

[58] For a summary of the critical reception of Watt's *Rise* thesis, see Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan, *Making the Novel: Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660-1789* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

literary matters'.[59] This is what I believe E. M. Forster was suggesting, albeit in a broader context, in his 1927 Clark Lectures at Cambridge, when he described the novel as 'that spongy tract'.[60] Forster was determined that the novel itself remain unfettered by determinism. He was happy to proclaim the slogan: 'History develops, Art stands still'.[61] He was not, of course, thereby suggesting that art cannot be informed by history – that would be literally fanciful. Rather, the work of art generally and the novel in particular has to be, paraphrasing Eliot, 'not consecrated by time, but to be seen beyond time.'[62]

It is this approach I seek to follow in the present study. My argument is that the rise of the novel, informed as we have seen by the concomitant rise of the individual, is also informed by a theological component, which I describe as parting with the ineffable. There are, in this argument, certain historical touchpoints that clearly need to be acknowledged; for example, the basic facts that the novel as we understand it was developing on the cusp of the Enlightenment, with all the philosophical and scientific ramifications that this entails. However, what I am suggesting in this study, much as Forster has in his Clark Lectures, is that the novel moves beyond those particular historical constraints and must be examined, less as an artefact than as a living work of art, renewed at every moment. Further, I am suggesting that theology, itself as an informing component in the development of the novel, be viewed in exactly the same way.

The temptation in theological circles is, like Jacob and the Angel, to consistently wrestle with history. There is, of course, a certain inevitability about this insofar as the Christian faith is concerned, defined as it is by the historical crisis of the Incarnation. History determines faith and faith subsequently, as the somewhat ambiguous experience of the Emperor Constantine attests, changes history. So, for example, we find Max Weber, in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-5), pointing to a particular expression of the rise of individuality, in the guise of a reformed, but self-interested spirituality, which leads to specific economic

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[59] Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 21.
[60] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 38.
[61] Ibid., p. 36.
[62] T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 3.

consequences.[63] Once again, however, as with Ian Watt's explanation of the rise of the novel, one can suggest that this is not a wholly representative picture of theological experience. Theology, like the novel, cannot be bounded by history. There is a transcendent element to theological experience which defies the temporal. Nonetheless, what I am suggesting is that the incarnation of the novel form provides for us a means by which we can recover not only a particular historical connection between the novel and theology, namely the parting with the ineffable, but also, a broader transcendent connection between the novel and theology which serves as a means to understand more clearly the mysterious workings of both art forms.

And it is here that I am returned to the prose poem of Oscar Wilde. We discover in this poem in prose the cost that must be borne for a work to be revealed; we recognise, too, that, though there is sacrifice, there is a resultant hope, and that this hope, though fleeting, is what drives the artist to move beyond himself to expose the glorious and mysterious frailty of the human condition. What can be said of the work of art, I believe, can and ought to be said for theology, and it is with this desire in mind that I approach our study of Henry Fielding.

April 22nd 2007 marked the 300th anniversary of Henry Fielding's birth. To celebrate this tercentenary, Cambridge University Press published a volume dedicated to the great man.[64] Each of the essays in the volume follows a broadly socio-historical interpretative path. So we find pieces on Fielding's theatrical, journalistic and legal careers as well as, of course, his 'new province of writing' – the novel.[65] We have essays on Fielding's style and, to a lesser extent, on Fielding's political and moral sensibilities. Leaving aside Charles Knight's contribution, 'Fielding's Afterlife',[66] there is a broadly static examination of the man and his work. This volume followed a conference held in 2004 at Yale University to mark the 250th anniversary of Fielding's demise. What is of some note is the range of papers presented at this commemorative

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[63] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1987). Weber's thesis has, of course, been challenged in several key areas. For a more sophisticated assessment see particularly the classic *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926) where it is argued that one cannot confine the rise of capitalism chiefly to Calvinism, as Weber had suggested. R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: John Murray, 1964), especially pp. 319-321.

[64] Claude Rawson,ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Henry Fielding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[65] Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, ed. by Sheridan Baker (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), II.i.53. Hereafter, *Tom Jones*.

[66] *The Cambridge Companion to Henry Fielding*, pp. 175-188.

conference. Of the twelve papers read, all but two or three appear to present socio-historical assessments of Fielding and his work. Of these, Joseph Roach's, "'The Uncreating Word': Silence and Unspoken Thought in Fielding's Drama" seems to suggest a less traditional approach.[67] It may be unfair to criticise this balance of studies in the context of either a celebratory collection or an anniversary conference, but it does appear to be symptomatic of the direction Fielding scholarship has taken over these last two and a half centuries.

John Unsworth some time ago pointed out the tendency in Fielding scholarship to approach his work in general and *Tom Jones* in particular, in a broadly synchronic fashion.[68] Large numbers of critical studies testify to just such an approach.[69] There is a common and understandable desire to seek to explore Fielding's works within their peculiar historical and cultural context and thereby provide a more or less prescribed (not to say, 'pure') reading. Burke makes clear the extent of this temporal significance when he states, 'the chronological position [of Fielding's works] alone indicates that they somehow affected the direction prose fiction would take in the future.'[70] The very weight of being first in what has become a long literary line behoves critics to value that position and investigate it accordingly.

Thus, we have studies reflecting Fielding's general approach to politics and more particularly to the '45.[71] Fielding's perception of the authorial process in its specific historical context has received massive coverage.[72] His attitude to religion (a factor, as Porter points out, which was of no little import in the mid eighteenth century given

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[67] For the conference agenda, see the website:
http//beinecke.library.yale.edu/events/Henry%20Fielding%20Website/Fielding%20Agenda.htm
[68] John Unsworth, 'The Comedy of Knowledge', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 48 No. 3 (1987), 233-253.
[69] See John A. Stoler and Richard D. Fulton, *Henry Fielding: An Annotated Bibliography of Twentieth Century Criticism* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1980).
[70] John Burke Jr., 'History Without History', in *A Provision of Human Nature: Essays on Fielding and Others in Honor of Miriam Austin Locke*, ed. by Donald Kay (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1977), p. 45.
[71] See, for example, Martin Battestin, 'Fielding's Changing Politics and *Joseph Andrews*', *Philological Quarterly*, 39 (1960), 39-55. Anthony Kearney, '*Tom Jones* and the Forty-Five', *Ariel* 4 (1973), 68-78. Thomas R. Cleary, 'Jacobitism in *Tom Jones*: The Basis for an Hypothesis', *Philological Quarterly*, 52 (1973), 239-51.
[72] See, for example, Sheridan Baker, 'Fielding and the Irony of Form', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 2 (1968), 138-54; Thomas Lockwood, 'Matter and Reflection in *Tom Jones*', *ELH*, 45 (1978), 226-35.

that 'practically everyone, in his own fashion, had faith'[73]), has likewise been extensively covered.[74]

Fielding, himself, appears to confirm the validity of such a socio-historical interpretative strategy when he describes his work as a 'great Creation'.[75] This, it has been argued, is suggestive of the immense influence of the Lockean epistemological schema which finds its way onto the pages of *Tom Jones*.[76] In the preface, Fielding sets out his goal in *Tom Jones* in the preliminary Bill of Fare: 'The provision, then, which we have here made is no other than HUMAN NATURE.'[77] This outwardly empiricist agenda would inevitably suggest a subsequent literary execution based upon similar principles.

Such a critique has clearly shed much light upon the socio-historical determinants brought to bear upon Fielding and his work. It can safely be said that Fielding's almost unique position as an author at the nativity of the novel form led to his work being studied in this way. The context, rather than the text, has served as the primary key to exploring Fielding's 'new province'.

Approaching the issue from a less synchronic perspective, however, one may suggest that many such critics are guilty of what Derrida describes as the 'sin of explicationism'.[78] So, for example, we find Ian Watt berating what he regarded as the shallowness of characterisation within Fielding's work and focussing upon the mechanical intricacies of the plot which contrasted with earlier romance. The end result of such investigation is Watt's confirmation that novels like *Tom Jones* only exist to preserve the social agenda of the privileged class.[79] Context comes before text in this and many of the studies cited above, and such temporally driven interpretative

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[73] Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 168.

[74] Ian Watt, '*Shamela*' in *Fielding: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. : Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 45-51; Irwin Ehrenpreis, 'Fielding: *Tom Jones*' in *Henry Fielding: A Critical Anthology*, ed., by Claude Rawson (Handsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), pp. 528-537; Sean Shesgreen, 'The Moral Function of Thwackum, Square, and Allworthy', *Studies in the Novel*, 2 (1970), 159-67.

[75] *Tom Jones*, X.I.337.

[76] Ronald Paulson, *The Life of Henry Fielding* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 209-10.

[77] *Tom Jones*, I.i.25.

[78] Jacques Derrida, 'Genesis and Structure' in *Writing and Difference*, p. 194.

[79] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 269.

strategies ignore, I believe, Fielding's own subversive *modus operandi* at several key areas of experience, as we shall discover in due course.

Unsworth is cognisant of this state of affairs and his particular critical strategy appears to centre on a desire to move away from a straightforward didactic interpretation and promote, to adopt Barthes' terminology, a less 'readerly' approach to Fielding. He argues that a critical component in such an open response is the awareness of the discrepancy of knowledge within novels such as *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*. This intellectual shortfall is not simply an empirical part of the plot of each work. It is integral to our response as readers for we, too, in our reading, become acutely aware of our own limited understanding. As Unsworth puts it, 'We as […] readers, are revealed to have had an epistemological status, a fallibility and a dependency, no different from the characters.'[80] The shortfall in our epistemology is not confined to the plot alone, but extends, I take it, to the multitude of ethical and metaphysical judgements that are made throughout Fielding's fiction. The consequences for reading Fielding are thus opened beyond the essentialist approach of most recent scholarship.

Intriguingly, however, when one does adopt a socio-historical perspective, we discover that Fielding's comedy is being generated in the very century increasingly occupied with system and classification, all of which, in Pope, has clear theological overtones:

> Vast chain of being, which from God began,
> Natures æthereal, human, angel, man,
> Beast, bird, fish insect! what no eye can see,
> No glass can reach! from Infinite to thee,
> From thee to Nothing![81]

However, all is not as secure as it may appear from the above and from other elegiac pieces regarding the development of the scientific method such as Pope's famous 'Epitaph':

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[80] Unsworth, 'The Comedy of Knowledge', p. 253.
[81] Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle I.viii, ed. by Maynard Mack (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 45.

<div align="center">
Nature, and Nature's laws lay hid in night.

God said, *Let Newton be!* And all was light.[82]
</div>

The notion of the great chain of being, itself, came under attack from those who for differing reasons remained unconvinced by this particular metanarrative. Bishop Butler, for example, in his sermon *Upon the Ignorance of Man* attacks the presumption of any complete control of God's creation:

> Creation is absolutely and entirely out of our depth, and beyond the extent of our utmost reach. And yet it is as certain that God made the world, as it is certain that effects must have a cause. It is indeed in general no more than effects, that the most knowing are acquainted with: for as to causes they are as entirely in the dark as the most ignorant. What are the laws by which matter acts upon matter, but certain effects; which some, having observed to be frequently repeated, have reduced to general rules? The real nature and essence of beings likewise is what we are altogether ignorant of. All these things are so entirely out of our reach, that we have not the least glimpse of them. And we know little more of ourselves, than we do of the world about us.[83]

Voltaire is more specific and politically barbed in his criticism:

> The gradation of beings which ascends from the lightest atom to the supreme being, this ladder of the infinite, strikes one with wonder. But when one looks at it attentively this great phantasm vanishes, as formerly all apparitions fled at the crowing of the cock.
>
> At first the imagination is gratified by the imperceptible passage from brute matter to organized matter, from plants to zoophytes, from the zoophytes to animals, from these to man, from man to spirits from these spirits, dressed in little aerial bodies, to immaterial substances, and finally to a thousand different orders of these substances which ascend from

[82] Alexander Pope, *Selected Poetry*, ed. by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 67.

[83] Joseph Butler, Sermon XV. 'Upon the Ignorance of Man', in *Butler's Sermons* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1874), p. 199.

beauty to perfection and finally to god himself. This hierarchy much pleases decent folk, who liken it to the pope and his cardinals followed by the archbishops and the bishops, after whom come rectors, vicars, simple priests, deacons, sub-deacons; then appear the monks, and the march-past ends with the capuchins.[84]

Can it be argued, however, that the chain found itself already threatened by the development of the novel (and particularly the comic novel) which provided an epistemological check upon the confidence of the system builders? These system builders, it would appear, mirror the humourless *agélastes* described by Kundera,[85] in that they are self-deluded into believing that their thinking actually forms a consistent and stable foundation. Indeed, can it be suggested that such a uniform picture of the broader philosophical Enlightenment and, more specifically, the artistic Augustan milieu out of which the novel came to develop and ultimately flourish, was far from secure? Pope's confident assertions in his *Essay on Man* (1734) are somewhat tempered by the earlier *The Dunciad* (1728)*, in which he ironically celebrates the new Augustan Age:

> This, this is He, foretold by ancient rhymes,
> Th'Augustus born to bring Saturnian times.[86]

The reference to 'Saturnian times' reflected, of course, the antithesis of the very stability the Augustan age was intended to herald. The 'new worlds' that art can create (*An Essay on Criticism*, 486) (1711), no longer reflect the providentially controlled and benign world that we inhabit, rather, they are an echo of a strange and portentous one. Henry Fielding, himself, suggested in his poem, 'Of True Greatness' (1743) that there is 'no *Augustan* Age',[87] thereby implying a suspicion of any artificially re-created stable society. On the contrary, art, as Fielding's own experience as a controversial dramatist amply illustrates, is a deeply subversive vehicle. Indeed, in

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[84] Voltaire, 'The Great Chain' in *Miracles and Idolatry*, trans. by Theodore Besterman (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 59.

[85] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 159.

[86] Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*, in *Selected Poetry*, ed. by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 156.

[87] Henry Fielding, 'Of True Greatness' in *Miscellanies*, ed. by Henry Knight Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 27.

one of his earliest and best-known plays, *Tom Thumb* (1730), later turned into *The Tragedy of Tragedies* (1731) we find Fielding explicitly attacking the notion of the metaphor so commonly adopted to foster a sense of universal security:

> *Noodle.*   Sure, Nature means to break her solid Chain,
>
> Or else unfix the World, and in a Rage
>
> To hurl it from its Axletree and Hinges;
>
> All things are so confus'd…[88]

This seems more in tune, (though nowhere near so sourly put), with Matthew Arnold in the next century, who, berating a preacher who advocated that mankind should be in harmony with nature, wrote:

> 'In Harmony with Nature?' Restless fool,
>
> Who with such heat dost preach what were to thee,
>
> When true, the last impossibility –
>
> To be like Nature strong, like Nature cool!
>
> Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more,
>
> And in that *more* lie all his hopes of good.
>
> Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood;
>
> Nature is stubborn, man would fain adore;
>
> Nature is fickle, man hath need of rest;
>
> Nature forgives no debt, and fear no grave;
>
> Man would be mild, and with safe conscience blest.
>
> Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends;
>
> Nature and man can never be fast friends.
>
> Fool, if thou canst not pass her, rest her slave![89]

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[88] Henry Fielding, *Tom Thumb* and *The Tragedy of Tragedies*, ed. by L. J. Morrissey (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1970), II.x.79.

[89] Matthew Arnold, 'In Harmony with Nature' (1877), in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, 1965), p. 54.

Rawson is ultimately led to state that Fielding 'occupies a special ambiguous position between an older world of aristocratic and neo-classic loyalties, and newer forces, one of whose literary manifestations is the novel-form itself'.[90] One can sense, then, (as has been previously alluded to in relation to Hitchens) that it would be presumptuous to apply any kind of fixed optimistic agenda to the period in question, and to Henry Fielding in particular. It would appear, rather, that the early eighteenth century itself was a period of religious and philosophical ambivalence. Such ambivalence finds a ready focus in the very nature of art itself, where we discern an inbuilt subversive strategy which seeks to undermine those uniocular systems set up to enable us to understand and thereby control our world. The novel, as part of that insidious artistic activity, thus becomes the place 'where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood'.[91]

Can it be, as a result of this, that the chain of being invoked to provide this controlling presence has, in the form of the novel, been replaced by a less ambitious, but perhaps more useful chain of messages? Assessing the hermeneutical strategy of Vattimo, Luca D'Isanto argues that very point:

> There is an awareness of belonging to a chain of messages as a moment in a process, which can never come to closure, which includes and transcends them. Such a chain is discontinuous insofar as it is interrupted by the rhythm of mortal generations that come into being and then pass away. The chain of messages consists in the historical-natural languages that make every experience of the world possible.[92]

It would appear that any so-called fixed frame of vision cannot be regarded as legitimate. The static and powerful chain of being is reduced to a fragile and fleeting chain of messages. In a word, metaphysics is reduced to story.

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[90] C. J. Rawson, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. x.
[91] Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 164.
[92] Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. by Luca D'Isanto & David Webb (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 8.

Developing from this broad historical and epistemological assessment, my specific aim is to reap a harvest from Fielding's work which is, as Doreen Roberts has commented, 'ripe for deconstruction'.[93] Given the weight of history which lies heavy upon Fielding research, such an aim may appear, at first glance, presumptuous or worse, a critical blasphemy. As a kind of preparatory defence, I would suggest that a more general claim for deconstruction has already been made. Recently, Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin pointed to the differing expectations held by generations of readers separated, not merely by time, but by an apparently irreconcilable critical discord.[94]

The very design and narrative artfulness which delighted the likes of the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher-poet, James Beattie,[95] two centuries later became the precise target of Frank Kermode who despised the narrative which comforts rather than questions the reader. In her study, Tobin illustrates the cultural gap that inevitably grows with the accretion of years. More significantly, however, she attempts to reveal the cultural bias (one might say 'fashion') that is to be found in every generation. The so-called post-modern mind, she argues, has little use for tight-knit plots and obligatory cosy endings. What becomes precious is the dissonance which, it is suggested, is closer to the lived human experience. As Tobin states, 'Eighteenth-century readers made order in disorder. Arguably, we make disorder in order.'[96]

Despite finding myself disagreeing with her bald assertion that happy endings inevitably formed a literary requirement of a world less ordered than our own,[97] Tobin (it seems unwittingly) makes the valid point that it is all too easy for us to cut

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[93] *Tom Jones*, ed. by Doreen Roberts (Ware, Herts.: Wordsworth Edition Ltd., 1999), p. 10.
[94] Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin, 'Bridging the Cultural Gap: Eighteenth-Century Narrative and Post-Modernism', *CLIO*, 17:3, (1988), 211-223.
[95] 'This author (Fielding), to an amazing variety of probable occurrences, and of characters well drawn, well supported, and finely contrasted, has given the most perfect unity, by making them all cooperate to one and the same final purpose.' James Beattie from 'An Essay on Poetry and Music' ?1762 (*Essays*, 1778), reprinted in *Henry Fielding: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Claude Rawson (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 171.
[96] Tobin, 'Bridging the Cultural Gap: Eighteenth-Century Narrative and Post-Modernism', p. 219.
[97] See my comments on Fielding's happy endings in Chapter 2.

ourselves off from what we regard as competing or defunct ideologies. Her plea is to seek out 'subversive texts, or subversion within dominant ideological texts'.[98] It is precisely such a search that is intended here.

Continuing my case for a deconstructive approach to Fielding, I would suggest that rather being the relativistic, or indeed nihilistic caricature that some try to paint deconstruction as,[99] there is a quality about this approach which is fundamentally in harmony with the sense of fragility which characterises this particular study. Walter Lowe makes the point clearly when he says that:

> Deconstruction implicitly depicts the human condition as a condition of radical brokenness and insecurity – and it (implicitly) depicts this situation as true. As a depiction of the human condition, this provides a basis, albeit a rather tragic basis, for human solidarity.[100]

What I would wish to develop from Lowe's sensitive analysis is that, echoing my earlier comments, there is in fact a comedic as well as a tragic dimension to this awareness of radical brokenness. Indeed, it is in the comedic form that I believe this fragility is recognised at its most acute.

Further to this point, when we examine Fielding's appellation of his work as a 'comic epic-poem in prose', we surely find ourselves presented with not simply a convenient, if somewhat clumsy technical term, but in fact a term that is understood through *difference*. Fielding describes the term for us thus:

> Now a comic Romance is a comic Epic-Poem in Prose; *differing* from Comedy, as the Serious Epic from Tragedy: its Action being more extended and comprehensive; containing a much larger Circle of Incidents, and introducing a greater Variety of Characters. It *differs* from the serious Romance in its Fable and Action, in this; that as in the one

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[98] Ibid., p. 220.
[99] See, for example, Roger Scruton's polemical *Upon Nothing* (Swansea: University College Swansea, 1993). In this lecture, Scruton describes Derrida as nothing less than the devil.
[100] Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 12.

these are grave and solemn, so in the other they are light and ridiculous: it *differs* in its Characters, by introducing Persons of inferiour Rank, and consequently of inferiour Manners, *whereas* the grave Romance, sets the highest before us; lastly in its Sentiments and Diction, by preserving the Ludicrous *instead* of the Sublime.[101] (*italics mine*)

While it is understandable that many have looked to Fielding's preface in *Joseph Andrews* for a deeper understanding of the nature of the new form known as the novel, one can see immediately that one of the key characteristics lies in the fact that Fielding saw it as *different*. The comic epic-poem in prose, as well as being an attempt at the definition of the novel form, is also an exercise in difference. Though Fielding informs us of the genres from which his comic Epic-Poem in prose differs, this does not tell us *precisely* what his new province of writing is. There is a certain openness to the new form which, despite even Fielding's preface, defies any strict definition. To this extent, I would suggest, that from the very first moment, there is opportunity to regard the novel form in Fielding's hands as worthy of deconstructive analysis.

In concluding for the defence, I do find myself agreeing with those who recognise that the philosophical seeds of deconstruction were sown long before the likes of Lyotard and Derrida. It can be argued that the very century which brought us the 'Great Creation' known as the novel, also provided the epistemological framework upon which the poststructuralist deconstruction was based. The novelist and critic, Milan Kundera, in his 1983 essay, 'The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes', assesses the milieu in which the novel emerges as a distinctive art form:

> As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognise. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths is parcelled out by

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[101] Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. by Homer Goldberg (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987), p. 4. Hereafter, *Joseph Andrews*.

men. Thus was born the world of the modern era, and with it the novel,

the image and model of that world.[102]

Kundera's contention is that the novel heralded a new world. But it was no sympathetic herald. The world of Leibniz, the world of determination and classification, the world of rationalisation was as fearsome as the old order of religion and superstition which it sought to supersede. The novel, as the artistically ambivalent and ambiguous herald to the grand project of progress and enlightenment, endeavoured to temper the optimism of the period. The novel's recognition of the frailness of the human condition and its awareness of the importance of the old stories which had moulded so much of human history were (and are) vital constituents in a form which showed the world its true face. In so doing, it offered some sense of security in a world of increasing diversity and change. The novel, then, holds a dual faceted function. It points to the past, in that it tells stories, and it points to the openness of the world by creating worlds of its own. Telling stories honours and continues the tradition of the human propensity to remember. Stories, at their most rudimentary are reflections on existence. They hold within them the seeds of the human spirit. They are our memories writ large. The novel form progresses this tradition in a new and potentially threatening context. This threat is found within the created worlds of the novel. In these worlds readers find themselves. And yet the world remains new and strange. There is indeed a rediscovery of humanity, and yet there is always a horizon that is open to be explored or run away from.

Kundera's assessment of the rise of the novel has merit in that it recognises both the cultural context within which the novel form arose and the psychological and spiritual roots from which the novel as an art form draws its energy and power. It is this psycho-spiritual rootedness which allows the novel to be ever-open to the world. The common denominator in Kundera's thesis is the denominator par excellence – God, the one in whom all existence has its source. And yet Kundera is distrustful of this heritage. He sees any ideology as a threat to the freedom (for better or worse) which the novel seeks to offer. The novel, he suggests, is not there to argue for a position; that is the role of religion and ideology. As he puts it, 'Man desires a world where

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[102] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 6.

good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands.'[103] The novel, rooted in the absence of God, has a different kind of wisdom, namely the wisdom of uncertainty.

However, Kundera has made the point himself when he argues that such a desire for certainty is innate in the human psyche. We get a glimpse of this deep desire in a novel like Iris Murdoch's *The Unicorn*, where in an early exchange between Marian Taylor and her employer, Hannah Crean-Smith we read:

> 'Well – you know that I love you,' said Marian. She was surprised to hear herself saying this. It was not the sort of thing she came out with usually. Yet it seemed quite natural here, or as if it were compelled from her.
>
> 'Yes. Thank you. I think, don't you, that one ought to cry out more for love, to ask for it. It's odd how afraid people are of the word. Yet we all need love. Even God needs love. I suppose that's why He created us.'
>
> 'He made a bad arrangement,' said Marian, smiling. Since uttering the word she felt that she did love Hannah more: or simply that she did love her, since she had given no name before to her affectionate feelings.
>
> 'You mean because people don't love Him? Ah, but they do. Surely we all love Him under some guise or other. We have to. He desires our love so much, and a great desire for love can call love into being. Do you believe in God?'
>
> 'No,' said Marian. She felt no guilt at this admission, she was too firmly held in the conversation. She had not realized that Hannah was a religious person. She never went to church. 'You do?'
>
> 'Yes, I suppose I do. I've never really questioned it. I'm no good at thinking. I just have to believe. I have to love God.'
>
> 'But suppose you're loving – something that isn't there?'
>
> 'In a way you can't love something that isn't there. I think if you really love, then something *is* there. But I don't understand these things.'[104]

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[103] Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 7.
[104] Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 53.

Leaving aside the complex and subtle psycho-sexual overtones which have an important part to play in both this key passage and the novel as a whole, we can discern here an awareness of the paradoxical human experience of the absent presence of God, which serves as a critical and specific expression of the general tension between security and insecurity, between certainty and doubt, which colours the human condition. My contention is that it is this very tension between the desire for certainty placed alongside the reality of human frailty that is reflected, not only in modern works of fiction such as *The Unicorn*, but is in evidence at the rise of the novel itself, and which is exhibited particularly at the heart of the work of Henry Fielding. Indeed, I would suggest that the rise of the novel form itself posits a quietly insurgent critique of the entire Enlightenment project. It becomes a Trojan Horse in the house of rationalism. The novel itself is the joke that explodes the myth of certainty. As Kundera has written elsewhere, 'The novel is born not of the theoretical spirit but of the spirit of humour.'[105] The novel, then, charges in as an ironic herald of a postmodern understanding of the world at the very rise of modernism.

Kundera roots his analysis in the departure of God (and by extension, one assumes, the lordship of human reason). But we must ask: is God truly removed from the creation of these worlds? Have the new creators supplanted the Originator of all? A cursory glance at the publishing history of the eighteenth century would indicate that God appears to be very much present, albeit as yet another player in an increasingly competitive literary market. Brian Young has indicated that the distinction we take for granted between theology and other forms of literature, was less pronounced in Fielding's day. He argues that 'although long interpreted as an inherently secularizing genre, the eighteenth-century novel was also frequently a form of theological literature'.[106] The attitude of the churches and clerics toward romances and other forms of literature obviously varied. William Law would never have countenanced the reading of 'corrupt' texts such as plays, but the substantial figure of William Warburton more than compensated for such an enthusiastic rejection of unedifying literature. The ambivalent attitude of the church merely reflected the impossibility of attempting to confine the development of forms of artistic expression that, though

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[105] Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 160.
[106] Brian Young, 'Theological Books from *The Naked Gospel* to *The Nemesis of Faith*', in *Books And Their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays*, ed. by Isabel Rivers (London: Continuum Press, 2003), p. 84.

grounded in the religious ferment of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, sought to honour and indeed emulate the erudition of the likes of Virgil, Horace and Aristophanes.[107]

Fielding's major works, themselves, are replete with scriptural reference and allusion. His characters, particularly his most singular creation, Abraham Adams, have strong connections with the church and overall the impression is that we are being drawn into a world which has, at its core, a determination to foster 'good nature'. Can we then, so easily dismiss God from the picture of the rise of the novel?

Though in sympathy with Kundera's broad assessment of the psychological/spiritual substructure that underpins the rise of the novel, I would not submit to his summary dismissal of God from this framework. Granted, he qualifies this dismissal by describing himself as being attached 'to nothing except the depreciated legacy of Cervantes', in other words, the recognition that the novel, as exemplified in *Don Quixote*, seeks to present us with the complexity of existence. There is, however, a difference between the absence of God and the *hiddeness* of God. I would argue that the hiddeness of God is *present* in these novels. And it is precisely due to the tensions that the Enlightenment project unleashed that the relationship between God and his creation is also set in relief. That focus is found particularly in the written word and especially in the newly created world of the novel.

These theological and artistic bases outlined above thus serve to indicate how conducive a writer like Fielding is to the development of an understanding between the novel and theology. However, like many a relationship, this one has to be forged in the furnace of alienation. Each begins estranged from the other. The common root of this estrangement, as we have noted, is to be found in the potentially perilous

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[107] Fielding, with the assistance of his friend, Rev William Young (most probably Fielding's model for Parson Adams), published a translation of Aristophanes' play, *Plutus* in 1742. Fielding held mixed views on Aristophanes. Whilst recognising his genius from an early stage in his own theatrical career, Fielding was to later condemn Aristophanes for using his talents irresponsibly. Knight attempts to reconcile the situation when he states that 'Fielding's rejection of Aristophanes [...] may reflect not a change in his basic view but a change in context and a redefinition of scope.' Charles A. Knight, 'Fielding and Aristophanes', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 21: 3 (1981: Summer), 481-498 (482).

absence of God. It is here, in the hiddenness of God, that the activity of misplacement is to be discerned.

<u>*Hiddenness*</u>

In his study, *The Disappearance of God*, J. Hillis Miller attempts to trace the development of spiritual alienation with particular reference to the work of five nineteenth-century writers. His broad thesis is that, since at least the post-medieval period, there is evidence of 'a gradual withdrawal of God from the world'. The once close-knit relationship between God, man and nature emphasised in the ritual festivals and particularly the Eucharist (the archetype of the divine analogy) has, in Miller's words, been progressively split apart. The cause of this rupture, Miller goes on to argue, is mysterious. Wary of the various ideological explanations marshalled to account for changes in human behaviour or belief, Miller appears content to offer the tentative conclusion that 'the disappearance of God has been caused not so much by man's turning his back on God, as by a strange withdrawal of God himself'.[108]

This withdrawal, if it is at all explicable, has at its source an epistemological crisis – namely the expansion of human awareness of his universe and his own increasing insignificance in that universe. The deepening sense of the grandeur or menace of the infinity within which mankind finds itself, reinforces, if not a sense of isolation, then a distance from all that would provide any unifying potential. For writers in the increasingly industrialized, urbanized and subjectified nineteenth century, who mourn the loss of that spiritual connectedness with the land and a more coherent society, the spiritual sense of dislocation, not to say desolation, was acutely felt and subsequently reproduced in their work.

Such dislocation, according to Miller, contrasts markedly with a writer like Henry Fielding who, it is maintained, retains much of the spiritual confidence increasingly diminished in his literary successors:

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[108] J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 4.

In eighteenth-century English literature […] for example in *Tom Jones*, the hero is initially in doubt about his identity, but it usually turns out in the end that there is a place waiting for him in a stable society. In eighteenth-century England the stability of the social order, sustained by divine Providence, is a guarantee of the stability of selfhood.[109]

Miller's thesis, I believe, appears to ignore two factors, one general and the other more specifically related to his statement regarding Fielding. The first thing which needs to be addressed is his presumption of the sense of spiritual isolation encountered in nineteenth-century literature as a culmination of such a 'gradual withdrawal of God from the world'. While acknowledging his assessment of the particular and obvious sociological factors which, in the period Miller is studying, led to man's increasing isolation from his land, his work and himself, such alienation surely is not, I would suggest, a uniquely modern phenomenon, and is not merely apparent in the literature of the nineteenth century. One can legitimately argue that the sense of alienation outlined by Miller has some high profile literary precursors. The Psalmist and the writer of the Wisdom books of Job and Ecclesiastes surely attest to similar experiences of alienation:

Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure. Do you fix your eye on such a one? Will you bring him before you for judgment? Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one! Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed. So look away from him and let him alone, till he has put in his time like a hired man.

At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant. But man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more.[110]

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[109] Ibid., p. 9.
[110] Job 14. 1-10.

One, of course, can argue that Job, despite his trials and tribulations, ultimately and in traditional comedic fashion, receives his reward and lives happily ever after. But the question must be asked whether such restoration negates the essential elements of loss and alienation present in the text itself. If the complaints evident in the book of Job merely serve to prefigure an inevitable blessed state then one cannot take those complaints seriously. But there is clearly no evidence of this in the text. The complaints are real; which is why the book of Job has been turned to again and again over the centuries as a key text in the context of the perennial conundrum of human suffering. That being the case, we must conclude that the literature of alienation has a longer history than Miller would suggest.

What the book of Job illustrates is that very characteristic already introduced above, namely the *hiddenness* of God. As Eaton, commenting on the above passage in his monograph, *Job*, makes clear:

> Job addresses the still hidden God. If only he would speak with Job plainly and without overwhelming terror, and show him where he has gone wrong! But he hides his face, treats him as an enemy, and leaves him to wonder what follies of his youth still count against him. And the suffering Job pictures himself as […] a storm-driven leaf, a fettered prisoner, a moth-eaten garment.[111]

It is here in the Book of God itself that we discern the departure of the anthropomorphic intervening God. It is notable, in a book so associated with the perennial and tangible problem of human suffering, that we find the text wherein the deity as the all-powerful, all-knowing one, is quietly ushered off the stage.[112] Indeed, as Richard Elliott Friedman has provocatively suggested, it is the very discontinuity with such visceral contact with God in the natural realm which inevitably leads to an increasing sense of divine absence:

> Now by moving the essence of divinity from the realm of nature to the realm of history, Israelite religion made it possible for a deity to

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[111] J.H. Eaton, *Job* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), p. 8.
[112] See also my later related comments regarding blasphemy and Job in Chapter 4.

recede…Whenever a biblical author lived, no matter how long after the events he or she was narrating, his or her perception would be that God's visible acts had diminished. That is, the placement of God in history, inevitably, meant departure.[113]

The Bible then, intriguingly, becomes less a crucible of the chemistry between God and his people, than a testament to God's increasing hiddeness from the story. However, Friedman's suggestion that history replacing nature is the key to God's departure has deeper implications. The history that Friedman is alluding to is, of course, *written* history. It is in the very act of writing that the divine is gradually written out. Friedman has pointed us to the reality that, even in a sacred text, the principle of writing God out of the story cannot be avoided. It is this writing God out of the story which I call the misplacement of God, to which we shall shortly return.

Moving into the post-biblical era, we find that the notion of hiddenness had a particular resonance for Augustine, who, in a series of opening questions strives to come to terms with the prime question, 'How shall I call upon my God?' So we encounter this tortured series:

> Is it that because all things cannot contain the whole of you, they contain part of you, and that all things contain the same part of you simultaneously? Or does each part contain a different part of you, the larger containing the greater parts, the lesser parts the smaller? Does that imply that there is some part of you which is greater, another smaller? Or is the whole of you everywhere, yet without anything that contains you entire?[114]

These, and others like them, emphasise Augustine's recognition of his own inability to come to terms with even the very fundamentals of God's own existence. As

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[113] Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Hidden Face of God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 88-89.

[114] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), I.iii.4.

Chadwick puts it, for Augustine, 'All words are inadequate for the expression of divine mysteries.'[115] God is hidden, as it were, behind the cloak of words.

One of Augustine's significant theological successors, Martin Luther, greatly expanded upon the notion of the hidden God with his expansion upon the distinction between the *Deus absconditus* and the *Deus revelatus*. For Luther, the mysteries of God serve to magnify his greatness and point us away from pride. So we find in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525) Luther responding to Erasmus's claim for human freedom:

> Diatribe, however, deceives herself in her ignorance by not making a distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is between the Word of God and God himself. God does many things that he does not disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word. Thus he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his. It is our business, however, to pay attention to the word and to leave that inscrutable will alone, for we must be guided by the word and not that inscrutable will. After all, who can direct himself by a will completely inscrutable and unknowable? It is enough to know simply that there is a certain inscrutable will in God, and as to what, why and how far it wills, that is something we have no right whatever to inquire into, hanker after, care about, or meddle with, but only to fear and adore.[116]

Leaving aside the typical rasping tone of this text, Bernard Lohse recognises that, here, Luther 'came near to exceeding the limits of what we are allowed to think or say' about God.[117] The hiddenness of God, perhaps more than Luther intended or

[115] Ibid., xxii.
[116] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Vol. 33*, ed. by Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 140.
[117] Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, trans. by Roy A. Harrisville (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), p. 215. For a brief but useful assessment of Luther's *Deus absconditus* and its influence on the literature of the period, see Paul R. Sellin, 'The Hidden God: Reformation Awe in Renaissance English Literature', in *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance*, ed. by Robert S. Kinsman (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 147-196.

realised, holds deeper implications than merely serving as a foil to human hubris. It points us to the possibility of a God who is deconstructed.

Closer to the period under discussion in this study, and turning from theology to literature, such hiddenness can be detected with equal force in the writing of Milton where, in *Paradise Lost*, we read:

> Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.[118]

This extraordinary dénouement highlights the deeply paradoxical nature of humanity's post-lapsarian condition. Adam and Eve find themselves both defiant - 'tears wiped soon', and yet dependent - 'Providence their guide'. Their means of opportunity though open and infinite, – 'The world was all before them' – becomes, in fact, a source of spiritual torment – 'where to choose'. The pair advance together - 'hand in hand', and yet are isolated from one another seeking stability in 'their place of rest' and yet, it seems, destined to perpetually pursue 'their solitary way'. Such solitariness extends, of course, beyond merely the relationship of Adam and Eve, itself, to include the God who had once walked with them in the cool of the evening.

If we move forward once more into the eighteenth century, Karl Barth has pointed to the 'characteristic of the time that alongside the study of the natural world the favourite scientific objects were primarily the study of the nature and activity of the human soul'.[119] Such study is clearly reflected in the nascent novel form and it is here that we find possibly the most obvious example of the human experience of isolation in the shape of *Robinson Crusoe*. Novak points out that fear was 'the dominant passion of a man in Crusoe's condition'.[120] However, in his *Serious Reflections*

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[118] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2000), XII.645-649.288.
[119] Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Brian Cozens and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 26.
[120] Maximillian E. Novak, 'Robinson Crusoe's Fear and the Search for the Natural Man', *Modern Philology*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (May 1961), 238-245.

(1720), Defoe makes clear that solitude founded upon 'formalities, rigours, and apparent mortifications was 'a rape upon human nature'.[121] In other words, what Defoe here emphasises is the specifically Protestant 'purity' of a solitude which, unbound by convention and sacral legalism, serves as a means to self-improvement – a signal aspect of Crusoe's experience on the island. Solitude, for Crusoe is a harsh but necessary teacher.

We are brought now to the second and more specific criticism of Miller's assessment of *Tom Jones*. In this text, which Miller points to as evidence of joyous security in the providence of the divine, there is more than meets the eye. It is too easy to assume that, due to the comic nature of the text, *Tom Jones* or, indeed, *Joseph Andrews* are thereby precluded from displaying any of the alienation which, Miller stresses, belongs chiefly to a later period. Rather, as we shall attempt to show, Henry Fielding delighted in subverting those very cherished notions of Providence and Prudence which appear at first glance to be the hallmark, if not as some would argue, the very purpose, of his novel writing.[122] There is, as we shall illustrate in due course, a deep awareness of the fragility of human existence even in his comic fiction. Such awareness is undoubtedly borne out of personal tragedy, but more than this, Fielding's own sense of his task as Creator points to an inevitable realisation of the potential for words and meaning to be misplaced. Isolation, in Fielding's fiction, then, is experienced, not only at the socio-historical plane, denied by Miller, but more critically, at the textual plane itself. For Fielding, God's place (and by extension humanity's) is not as secure as Miller would appear to suggest.

One, therefore, needs to be cautious when assigning such spiritual isolation to a specific historical or literary period. As we have outlined, tensions have persisted in the presentation of the divine in both theological reflection and literature through countless generations and genres. Nonetheless, Miller recognizes the specific contribution made by the novel form in this awareness of the hiddenness of God. It is my contention however that the work of Henry Fielding exhibits elements of the very alienation Miller would locate in the nineteenth century.

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[121] Daniel Defoe, *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe with his Vision of the Angelick World* (London: printed for W. Taylor, 1720), p. 7.
[122] See below, Chapter 5.

To summarise then, the experience of the hiddenness of God, I would suggest, is a fundamental mark of *all* literature and is not merely confined, for example, to the retreat of the Sea of Faith described by Arnold in *Dover Beach*. It is, as we have seen, present in the sacred Judeo-Christian literature which purports to convey the very interaction between God and Israel and God and the wider world. It is present in the great tradition of literature which has come down to us over the centuries. And it is present in the work of the great early exponents of the English novel generally, and in the creations of Henry Fielding in particular.

Looked at in a more dynamic fashion, by the term *hiddenness* I am partially following Pascal who, in his *Pensées*, states: 'What can be seen on earth points to neither the total absence nor the obvious presence of divinity, but to the presence of a hidden God.'[123] Pascal, however, like Luther before him, appears to regard the notion of the hiddenness of God as a necessary component in a broader salvific strategy whereby some are blessed while others remain in darkness. So we read: 'We can understand nothing of the works of God unless we accept as a matter of principle that he wished to blind some and enlighten others.'[124] For Pascal, as in Luther, the hiddenness of God is a means to puncturing the pride of humanity. In this respect it is a rather passive exploration of God's nature and his activity in the world.

My understanding of hiddenness, however, has a more active character and this finds its clearest expression in Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

> We cannot be honest unless we recognise that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognise – before God! God himself compels us to recognise it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15. 34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God

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[123] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* 449, trans. by A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 170.
[124] *Pensées* 232, p. 101.

before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God.[125]

I find in Bonhoeffer's formulation a much livelier understanding of the mutuality engendered by the concept of hiddenness. The tension that is created by the present, yet absent God, the hidden God before whom we stand, and not only stand but grow and mature, reflects precisely those selfsame tensions that the Enlightenment project unleashed. For, as we have noted, it is at this particular moment that the relationship between God and the creation is set in relief. That focus is found particularly in the written word and especially in the newly created world of the novel.

Misplacement

The notion of *misplacement* will form the fundamental interpretative tool in the present study and so it is incumbent upon me to point out the usefulness of the term. However, prior to establishing the hermeneutical force of misplacement for our study it is appropriate to trace its philosophical echoes. The two main antecedents of the term are to be found in Heidegger and Derrida. Indeed, we can discern a natural development from the one to the other. Heidegger, in his desire to excise the technological fixation of modernity, and move to a deeper appreciation of the being of the work of art, argues that art does not merely resemble or reflect the world (in this sense he rejects the fundamental notion of mimesis). Rather, art sets up an overall 'world' which allows us to see the work of art as something which transforms our whole consciousness of the context within which the art object has its being. The famous example Heidegger offers is a painting of peasant shoes by Van Gogh. He states:

> As long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or simply look at the empty unused shoes as they merely stand there in the picture, we shall never discover what the equipmental being of the equipment in truth is. From Van Gogh's painting we cannot tell where these shoes stand. There

is nothing surrounding this pair of shoes in or to which they might belong – only an undefined space. There are not even clods of soil from the field or the field-path sticking to them, which would at least hint at their use. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet -[126]

This 'and yet', for Heidegger, forms the power of self-disclosure which inheres in the work of art. This power is not something produced by the artist. It is a creation *ex nihilo*. Heidegger makes the point explicitly:

> Does truth, then, arise out of nothing? It does indeed if by nothing is meant the mere not of that which is, and if we here think of that which is an object present in the ordinary way, which thereafter comes to light and is challenged by the existence of the work as only presumptively a true being. Truth is never gathered from objects that are present and ordinary. Rather, the opening up of the Open, and the clearing of what is, happens only as the openness is projected, sketched out, that makes its advent in thrownness (*Geworfenheit*).[127]

Truth, in this sense, is not to be confused with mere correctness. Heidegger adopts the Greek term *aletheia* which he translates as 'uncoveredness' or 'unconcealment' to point to the fact that truth cannot be commoditised. The corollary of this is that art, itself, is not merely to be 'explained' or 'understood', for this would be, in some sense, to domesticate it and reduce one's capacity to actively engage with, in the case of poetry for example, the language of the work of art and its power to reveal so-called 'deep history' (*Geschichte*). In the case of the poet, Hölderlin, for example, Heidegger claims that his works actively discloses a nihilism which defies contextualization. As Heidegger states:

> This essence of poetry belongs to a definite time. But not in such a way that it merely conforms to that time as some time already existing. Rather, by providing anew the essence of poetry, Hölderlin first determines a new

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[126] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (London: Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 34-5.
[127] Ibid., p. 69.

time. It is the time of the gods who have fled *and* of the god who is coming.[128]

The poem itself, then, becomes the *act* in which this nihilism is discerned. It thus defies history and thereby becomes a vehicle for the transformation of the reader. What is, of course, interesting about this last quotation from Heidegger is how readily it resonates with Kundera's assessment of the novel as being rooted in the absence/presence of God. Both appear to share a common sense of the work of art as somehow inhabiting a fragile sacred space.

It is this latter point regarding space which Derrida utilizes in his own deconstructive project. He does so, however, in such a way as to leave no room for Heidegger's apparent idealization of the text and his distinction between *Dichtung* ('poetizing') and other (lower) forms of 'literature'. Indeed, this is symptomatic of Derrida's broader criticism of Heidegger in that the latter remains, in Derrida's view, 'logocentric' to the extent that he appears to reserve a place for truth lying in the difference between being and Being, (and thereby engenders a reductive metaphysics he claims to avoid). More specifically, at the literary level, for Derrida, all literature is equally contaminated. It exhibits the very frailty we have seen as a mark of our study thus far. Nevertheless, the Heideggerian notions of 'throwness', *aletheia* and 'destruction' lead Derrida to develop his own assessment of the being of the work of art. This assessment avoids the idealism of Heidegger but nonetheless embraces the undecidability and openness that the work of art in its creation *ex nihilo* offers.

Further, Derrida embraces the term *khora* from Plato's *Timaeus* to emphasise this sense of the abyss between words and meaning. This abyss, Kamuf describes as the 'penumbral space in which writing survives to go on playing beyond the exhaustion of a living intention'.[129] As Derrida, himself, puts it, 'a text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game.'[130] The world of the text is, it would seem, for Derrida, a playful shadow

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[128] Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations on Hölderlin*, quoted in Timothy Clark, *Martin Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 108.
[129] Peggy Kamuf, 'Composition Displacement', *MLN* 121 (2006), 872-892.
[130] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), p. 63.

world devoid of the idealistic overtones in the Heideggerian schema. This shadow world is generated through his utilisation of the term 'displacement' which teases out for us the sense of dislocation that the act of writing/reading produces.

From this, and related to Husserl's phenomenological work on representation, Leonard Lawlor has coined the term *Verstellung* that is, a 'replacing which is a mis-placing'. Such a mis-placing, haunted as it is in the very abyss Derrida describes, defies those boundaries of time and space and reveals the ever open, ever fragile nature of human experience. As Lawlor puts it, 'This mis-placing is life, and insofar as life is always misplaced, it goes over the limit and includes death – or memory.'[131]

Taking Lawlor's assessment on board, I would wish to add a further component, namely the comedic nature of human existence. As a consequence, misplacement, as I envision it, offers a means to experience the world in what I would describe as a grounded transcendental fashion, that is, an experience of fragile hope based upon an awareness of the potential that amongst other things, the work of art, and particularly comedy, can provide.

Integral to this comedic fragility is the aspect of forgetfulness. Gadamer describes the embarrassment of the philosophical community in its 'essential forgetfulness of being'.[132] The problem of nothingness lay at the root of this embarrassing forgetfulness. This problem of nothingness, I would suggest, is constitutive of comedy. Roy Eckhardt says as much when he outlines what he describes as ten 'proto-jokes' which force us to examine the human situation:

1. Being-amidst nothingness
2. Order versus chaos
3. The absence of any say in one's birth
4. Death amidst life
5. Is versus the ought
6. Self abnegation versus self-centredness

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[131] Leonard Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 11.

[132] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall, 2nd edn. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), p. 257.

7. The human thrust/will to partake of or relate to infinity

8. Body in juxtaposition to Spirit

9. Clothing vis-à-vis nakedness

10. Humans as against domestic animals[133]

One recognizes immediately in the first of these examples the deep connection between comedy and being/nothingness. Eckhardt elaborates on the primary proto-joke when he writes:

> How could there be such an incongruity as this? How could it be that there is something rather than nothing? How could it be that there is nothing where something has been? Here, perhaps, lies the *Urgrund,* the ultimate ground of all human comedy (as of all human weeping) - not to mention public performances of magic, a first cousin of comedy. In the game of peek-a-boo the very small child already apprehends something of this primordial joke.[134]

As has become a cliché by now, we are here reminded once again that comedy is a serious business. One can see in the examples above that the notion of what I describe as fragile comedic misplacement blurs the Aristotelian distinction between comedy and tragedy. As Eckhardt indicates, 'The shortcoming in such differentiation is that comic laughter is never safe from despair, while the tears of tragedy just may be dried by the sunshine.'[135] In this respect, we recognise that misplacement shares with Derrida's displacement a subversive function. It is, however, in the critical context of a fragile, comedic hope where we witness that which distinguishes misplacement in this study from Derrida's voided 'displacement'.

It is important to recognise that the term misplacement, located as it is within the broader interpretative framework of human frailty, carries with it connotations of commission and omission. In the same way that sin can be thought of as either an act of will or neglect, so, too, we can witness to misplacement's activity in 'positive' and

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[133] A. Roy Eckhardt, 'Divine Incongruity: Comedy and Tragedy in a Post-Holocaust World', *Theology Today* 48, No. 4 (January 1992), 399-412.

[134] Ibid., p. 400.

[135] Ibid., p. 402.

'negative' categories. In this sense we can clearly see, once more, the link with forgetfulness. We must be clear, however, that, in using the terms 'positive' and 'negative' we are not making any value, let alone moral, judgement but are simply delineating the sphere of operation for the activity of misplacement.

Firstly, then, the act of writing is indeed an *act* – there is a determination, even a wilfulness to the activity no matter how difficult or demanding. Writing, be it theological writing, or novel or fictive writing, is always an artifice. It involves effort which, however many claims to inspiration are made, is inevitably and necessarily premeditated. Indeed, one can suggest that even an apparently idle doodle can have profound thought, however subliminal, lying at its root. Who, to use a scriptural example, could pretend that nothing lay at the back of Jesus's mind as he scribbled in the sand before the Pharisees and the woman caught in the act of adultery? Indeed, is it not possible that the very material he chose to write with – the finger and the dirt – pointed so clearly to the fragility of the human condition –'dust you are and to dust you shall return'?[136] Can we not see in this otherwise innocuous act, a profound and purposeful rebuke to those who saw themselves as superior to the one caught in an act of weakness?

To misplace, in my terms then, in the first instance, is to bring to pass. The narration of a text, be it written or read involves this 'bringing to pass'. It results in revelation. This revelation can, of course, adopt several forms from the simple statement of fact (we are using the term 'simple' extremely loosely!), to the more profound and intricate parabolic or metaphoric narrative. In either case, misplacement implies the active transmission of narrative. However, it is vital to recognise that this transmission, though premeditated, is never sure of the reception it will receive. Misplacement is a deliberate act which can only take place in the context of uncertainty, or more properly (as I have previously indicated) fragility. Indeed, I would go further and suggest that the very deliberate act of transmission is, in itself, constrained by fragility. Such constraint is not simply brought about through the anxiety of any potential reception but lies at the core of all communication.

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[136] Genesis 3. 19.

Secondly, while it seems clear that misplacement is, indeed, a deliberate act there is, nonetheless, in the act itself, a by-product – a parting with the ineffable. I use the continuous tense to suggest that the misplacement is once more not merely confined to the physical act of writing or narrating but carries on into the experience of reading the 'finished' text. It is in writing that we witness the simultaneous incorporating and incorporeal activity of misplacement. The physical and deliberate act leaves us with words and yet there is always more to be said. The gap between the activity of writing with the coincidental parting with the ineffable and any final meaning is a space of sacred and eternal dimensions. James Byrne captures a sense of this space when he briefly recapitulates his understanding of God:

> If the premodern worldview focused on God in a realist sense, and if the modern focused on the human subject as a replacement for the divine, then the post-modern worldview focuses on the space wherein God and the self – no longer understood as entities capable of being confined by concepts – might be encountered anew. This cultural space, or clearing, offers a renewed possibility for us here and now, at this time and in this cultural context. It is a possibility which presents an opportunity for hope; not hope for some future state of being, but hope for an encounter in and of the present.[137]

What is interesting about Byrne's assessment is his description of the resultant space as 'cultural'. By this, I take him to mean not only the broad sense of the word culture to describe a particular historico-sociological context, but also the more specific sense of artistic achievement and possibility. The encounter with God, for Byrne is found, then, in the creative space. Quoting Jean-Luc Marion, Byrne reinforces his argument thus:

> Concerning God, let us admit that we can think him only under the figure of the unthinkable, but of an unthinkable that exceeds as much what we cannot think as what we can; for that which I may not think is still the concern of *my* thought, and hence to *me* remains thinkable.[138]

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[137] James Byrne, *God* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 138.
[138] Ibid., p. 151.

The space of unthinkability/thinkability is concomitant with Byrne's 'cultural' space and, as a result, resonates deeply with the sacred and eternal space brought about by the act of misplacement already outlined above. Milan Kundera, intriguingly, offers us a specifically artistic parallel to Byrne's analysis of the history of God when he remarks: 'For the history of art is perishable. The babble of art is eternal.'[139] Any attempt to encounter the divine involves entering the sacred, eternal, cultural space provided by misplacement. This is a space which contrasts with that suggested by Hillis Miller:

> The artist is the man who goes out into the empty space between man and God and takes the enormous risk of attempting to create in that vacancy a new fabric of connections between man and the divine power.[140]

It seems, for Hillis Miller, this space is merely a void to be taken up by the artist to create a work that is radically new. It is, admittedly, a peculiarly romantic understanding of the space created by their experience of the abandonment of God. The assumption is that God has indeed finally gone. I would suggest, however, that the space is not a void but is already taken up with the potentiality that misplacement provides. The space itself is informed by the same coincidental activity of creation and parting with the ineffable. It is these two components which engender the space. Rather than being a place of abandonment, therefore, the space becomes a place of hope. Misplacement, therefore, provides a hopeful space where the word spoken by the artist and the theologian can be heard without prejudice.

Two obvious examples of this misplacement can be found in the pages of the Bible and in the New Testament particularly - the parables of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus. In the parables one discovers stories which contain kings, servants, widows, judges, landowners, and others including non-human characters such as mustard seeds, nets and vines – all of which point to the kingdom of God. And yet God is not mentioned in these parables except in some cases by way of explanation. The parable, the story itself exhibits the misplacement of God in order that there be a space for the receiver of the word (be it the original hearer or the later reader) to discern the

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[139] Kundera, *The Curtain*, p. 168.
[140] Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, pp. 13-14.

hiddenness of God, and so be continually confronted with a point of decision. The parables exhibit the misplacement of God in so far as they perpetually offer a crisis in the life of the listener/reader. I shall return later to the parables to see how this particular expression of misplacement is worked out in the fiction of Henry Fielding.[141]

The second example, that of the resurrection of Jesus, holds for us a paradigmatic outworking of the notion of misplacement. In the Gospel story, Jesus's body is literally misplaced. In the words of Mary Magdalene, we find the comic crisis: "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have put him."[142] Here the hiddenness of God reaches its ultimate dynamic and comic climax in the misplaced body of the Incarnate One. The Gospel writer increases the comic tension by providing us with a conversation between Mary and the very one who has been misplaced. Mary, believing that she is speaking to the gardener, asks Jesus to return what amounts to his own body. The irony, of course, is that this is precisely what has happened in the resurrection event – the body has been recovered. Mary, however, is seeking to secure the body of Jesus, and so, at the moment of revelation, when Mary hears her own name spoken, she attempts to do precisely this by holding on to Jesus. And it is at this moment where we encounter the practical outworking of misplacement, namely a parting with the ineffable. Jesus responds to Mary thus: 'Don't hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father, but go and tell my brothers that I am going…'[143] The intimacy with which this comic moment of misplacement is concluded is immediately set in its proper context of a departing.

We find, then, in the resurrection story, a profound sense of the purpose and scope of comedy to provide for us a space whereby we witness both intimacy and otherness. It is this dual witness which is a mark of the comic mode. We shall now move to examine more specifically how comedy is utilised by Henry Fielding as a means to further exploring the notion of misplacement.

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[141] See Chapter 2
[142] John 20. 13.
[143] John 20. 17.

Chapter Two

Henry Fielding: Subversive Comedian

> People who seek metaphysical causes for laughter are not cheerful.
>
> Voltaire

> Humour can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process
> and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.
>
> E. B. White

> In a word, the Opinions and Practices of Men in all matters and especially
> in Matters of Religion, are generally so absurd and ridiculous that it is
> impossible for them not to be the Subjects of Ridicule.
>
> Anthony Collins

Some Theories of Comedy

Already in this study, I have made mention of Unsworth' paper, 'The Comedy of
Knowledge' in which we acknowledged the temptation in Fielding scholarship to
follow a broadly synchronic route. Though in broad sympathy with Unsworth's thesis,
I find myself wishing to go further. In so doing, I seek in this chapter to develop an
understanding of the comedic which transgresses those traditional socio-historical
boundaries by which it has hitherto been confined. I aim to show that the comedic is
evidence of the misplacement, introduced earlier, which lies at the heart of human
experience.

Returning, however, briefly to Unsworth, we must find the epistemological bearings
for our discussion. It appears that, in his interpretative strategy, though intending to
avoid a narrowly straight-forward empirical approach, he appears to concentrate in a
similarly Lockean fashion upon the absence of knowledge in particular situations
throughout a novel like *Tom Jones*. Unsworth's essay provides example after
example of scenarios in which the absence of complete knowledge can be
demonstrated but fails to acknowledge that, within these and other areas of confusion,

there is a yet more insidious force at work. Unsworth's title betrays more than he intends. The absence of knowledge may well be a source of comedy but, I would suggest, knowledge, itself, *is* comedic. As we shall see in our discussion of parable later in this chapter, comedy is intimately connected with metaphor insofar as it is through the mediating trope of metaphor that we actually experience our world. By definition, then, as Unsworth makes clear, all knowledge is partial in that an individual cannot experience all truth about any given phenomena at any time. The awareness of this state of affairs at any one time can be revelatory and therefore amusing, but this in itself, I would argue, is merely symptomatic of more fundamental concerns regarding the fragility of the human experience at critical levels.[144] It is the contention here, as in the rest of this study, that our epistemological frame of reference is grounded in and informed by the comedic and that this is expressed clearly in the novel form. Moreover, this comedic frame of reference has a fundamental association with the religious experience of humanity. As Kundera has suggested, 'the art of the novel came into being as an echo of God's laughter'.[145] In the light of this, let us examine some of the significant critical thinking on the comedic.

Northrop Frye has indicated how the epistemological grounding mentioned above takes place, when he writes that the nature of comedy is:

> A movement from *pistis* to *gnosis* […] a movement from illusion to reality. Illusion is whatever is fixed or definable, and reality is best understood as its negation: whatever reality is, it's not *that*.[146]

There is then, in the comedic form, an inherent concern with the disruption of our sense of order, be that spatial, temporal, philosophical or theological.

Indeed, it is precisely at this last theological frame of reference that we find comedy to have its most telling and disturbing effects. For comedy to point out to us that

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[144] Such fragile knowledge has clear resonance with TeSelle's assessment of 'metaphorical knowledge' which she describes as 'a highly risky, uncertain, and open-ended enterprise'. Sally TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables* (London: SCM, 1975), p. 44.

[145] Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.158.

[146] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 169-70.

whatever reality is, it is not *that*, illustrates for us the deep connection between comedy and one of the potential by-products of metaphysical enquiry, namely the unsettling awareness that we are not in control of our own existence. Comedy's disruptive capability has long been recognised. Elaborating on the Aristotelian model, the disputed *Coislinian Tractate* (c. fourth – c. second century BCE), points to one of the characteristic figures of comedy as being that of the *impostor*.[147] In chapter 4 of this study, I will elaborate on this specific comedic trait in relation to blasphemy, suffice it to say at this point, that such a facet significantly amplifies the theological implications of the comedic.

However, prior to any elaboration of this comedic-theological claim, we must acknowledge, of course, that there are those who would seek to deny any such metaphysical connection and ground the subversive effects of comedy solely within the human sphere. For example, Olson in his *Comedy after Postmodernism*, drawing upon the work of Lyotard and Deleuze writes:

> Comedy is an immanent form that does not make us look into the heavens or to God for answers to questions… Comic theory traces a larger discourse over politics of the body and, within that discourse, between orthodoxy and heresy. Like desire, laughter is strangely fluid and cannot be contained by rational thought.[148]

What I find interesting in the above statement is the broad assumption that is made concerning the so-called 'heavenly' and 'bodily' realms. Despite Olson's later remarks that comedy 'is precisely *a certain freedom from definition*' (original emphasis),[149] comedy appears to be confined to what is regarded as its proper place, i.e. the here and now. Any question of legitimacy or otherwise can only be debated within the human, secular arena. It is the joke itself which allows us to move between the shadowy realms of the rational and the irrational. Indeed, there are those who

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[147] Quoted in Paul Lauter, *Theories of Comedy* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), pp. 21-23. Interestingly, in his theological analysis of Derrida's *différance*, John Caputo describes its activity as similar to that of an *agent provocateur*. '*Différance*', he argues, 'is the very idea of instigating the subversion of kingdoms wherever they appear.' John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, p. 26.
[148] Kirby Olson, *Comedy after Postmodernism: Rereading Comedy from Edward Lear to Charles Willeford* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2001), p. 5.
[149] Ibid., p. 6.

would see comedy tending to prefer to inhabit the latter of these two kingdoms.[150] Nonetheless, for Olson, there is no-outside-of-the-irrational. Irrationality belongs to the human sphere as much as rationality. Here comedy stands, it can go no further. We are, however, forced to ask the question, does the, presumably, artificial dichotomy which Olson describes really represent the extent of comedy's potential? I would suggest that the very desire to postulate such a heavenly/bodily dichotomy, if only in order to explode it, expresses an unnecessary limitation upon our understanding of both environments as spheres equally capable of expressing comedic activity. We will shortly revisit this question, but let us look at the subject briefly from another perspective.

Curiously, one can look to both Scripture and the Christian tradition to see evidence of a similar desire, though doubtless springing from a competing motivation, to separate the 'heavenly' from the 'bodily' or to put it more viscerally as the religious are prone to do – the 'fleshly'. So, for example, we find in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament:

> The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is
> in the house of mirth. It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a
> man to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot so
> is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity.[151]

The desire to view the imminent coming of a kingdom beyond this one (although it is unlikely that the writer of Ecclesiastes himself was motivated by such a desire) as the filter by which one should live now prompted an abrogation of the body to such an extent that even marriage itself was considered as superfluous. Believers were continually encouraged to be 'sober' and 'vigilant' and the question as to whether the founder of the faith actually laughed himself remained a matter of serious debate even to as late as the end of the sixteenth century.[152] The most celebrated expression of this in recent literature, of course, is Umberto Eco's postmodern novel, *The Name of the*

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[150] See for example, Morton Gurewitch, *Comedy: The Irrational Vision* (London: Cornell University Press, 1975).
[151] Ecclesiastes 7. 4-6.
[152] See Jacques Le Goff, 'Laughter in the Middle Ages', in *A Cultural History of Humour from Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. by Jan Bremmer & Herman Roodenburg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), pp. 40-53.

Rose (1980). Here we find the old monk, Jorge, so determined that the supposedly lost second book of *Poetics* (whose focus was comedy) remain secret that he is prepared to murder to that end. Laughter was, next to idleness, the chief threat to any self-respecting monk's spiritual harmony.

It is not my purpose at this point to offer a detailed history concerning the relationship between comedy and the church.[153] Suffice it to say that there remains in much, if not most of our post-enlightened, and even postmodern if not post-postmodern religious world a significant residual attraction to the heavenly/bodily dichotomy which mirrors that secular fascination outlined above.

Comedy, then, finds itself in a curious position. To adopt a rather weak pun, it appears to fall between two schools – the rational school and the metaphysical school. The former would seek to enslave comedy as a means to serving the body and the latter would seek to confine comedy within the body in order to redeem it for the proper joys of the next world. It is suggestive of the freedom from definition which constitutes both the comedic and the theological. As Aichele puts it, 'Just as the modern comic theorist can no longer be precise about what comedy is, so the modern theologian can no longer be precise about his definition of theology.'[154] Another way of describing this state of affairs is to say that both comedy and theology exhibit the fragility characteristic of misplacement.

Is such misplacement necessarily a problem for us? A means of answering that question, I believe, is to be found in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). A significant component of the place of comedy in the life of the religious has been documented by Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and his World* (1965). We refer, of course, to the carnival. Events such as the 'Feast of Fools', argues Bakhtin, serve to create for the people of the Middle Ages another world. Bakhtin describes the effect of these festivals:

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[153] For further elucidation see Howard Jacobson, *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (London: Viking, 1997).
[154] George Aichele, *Theology as Comedy: Critical and Theoretical Implications* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), p. 59.

They offered a completely different, non-official, extra-ecclesiastical and extra-political aspect of the world, of man and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom.[155]

Bakhtin's 'two worlds' postulation helpfully reflects the heavenly/bodily dichotomy mentioned earlier. But it does more than merely reflect. I would suggest that in the creation of these worlds through comedy, the dichotomy which appeared to confine the role of the comedic is actually transformed into a conjunction of both the heavenly and the bodily into a comedic metaphysics. Such a comedic metaphysics revels in the frailty of the human condition and, as a result, all interpretative strategies must subsequently be regarded as provisional. Comedy becomes the nemesis of system. It is, in the words of Paul Lauter,

[The] ludicrous schoolmaster […] leading man's *élan vital* against the bondage of imposed and unreasonable constraints, directing us toward freedom from the false claims of absolute validity made by finite categories and theorems.[156]

Such comic subversion, rather than directing us in an aimless or worse, nihilistic direction, actively encourages us to rediscover what David Cooper describes as 'an inexpressible, mysterious 'background' as the 'measure' of what we say and believe'.[157] In so saying, Cooper is asking us to recognise the aphasic nature of our experience of the world. There is an ineffable element to human experience which only a hubristic or thoroughly deterministic approach would seek to deny. As he himself puts it:

Humanists are right to say that any discursable world is a human one, but wrong to equate reality with a discursable world. Absolutists are right to

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[155] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 5-6.
[156] Lauter, *Theories of Comedy*, p. xx.
[157] David E. Cooper, *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility and Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 287.

say that reality is independent of 'the human contribution', but wrong to suppose that it is discursable.[158]

Cooper, of course, recognises the dilemma of apparently speaking about that which cannot be spoken about. This precisely constitutes the perennial problem for theology, as Smith writes, 'Theology is a discourse attended by constant prohibition.'[159] However, Cooper attempts to resolve this dilemma in a rather laboured way by distinguishing the uses of the words 'about' and "about". The textual example he offers is the expression: 'heroes are rare' which provides us with some information about the class of heroes without offering us anything by way of a definition as to the true nature of the hero. By this linguistic turn he suggests that we can speak of the ineffable without in any way assuming to describe or confine it.[160] The difficulty Cooper is confronted with here, I believe, can be faced rather less prescriptively and without recourse to any kind of semantic strategy by accepting the benign subversive nature of comedy itself. The aphasia which Cooper ironically attempts to defend semantically corresponds rather to a comic space whereby the mystery of human experience is received unselfconsciously. For it is through the comedic that the freedom to recognise limits is at its most acute. As Simon Critchley puts it:

> Laughter is an acknowledgement of finitude, precisely not a manic affirmation of finitude in the solitary, neurotic laughter of the mountain tops… but as an affirmation that finitude cannot be affirmed because it cannot be grasped.[161]

Such recognition must not be construed as an attempt to systematize the specific nature of either the epistemological limits which define the human experience, or the broader metaphysical limits which would otherwise define the ineffable. Rather, one can view this comedic vision as an expression of both the substantial frailty and the

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[158] Ibid., p. 279.

[159] James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

[160] James Smith attempts to resolve the problem in a different way by recourse to the Incarnation as a means by which God can appear phenomenologically. He thereby distinguishes between the transcendent God who cannot be spoken of and the 'worldly God' of the incarnation who can. *Speech and Theology*, pp. 54-5.

[161] Simon Critchley, *Very Little… Almost Nothing*, 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 187.

insubstantial presence which inheres in the hermeneutical experience called life. This mediating position avoids the necessity of choosing between the ineffable and the concrete.

In this respect, it is even possible to describe this misplaced comedic metaphysics as a fictional metaphysics. Literature, and particularly fiction, can be said to have no ontological hang-ups.[162] The distracting heavenly/bodily dichotomy is overcome through the active and necessary subversion which takes place in another heavenly body, namely the world of fiction. In this world the boundaries between tangible and intangible can be blurred, perceived certainties are recognised as provisional, gods are demonised and demons divinised.

It is this textual subversion which, at every moment, exposes us to the reality of our own epistemological frailty. However, the temptation to domesticate such subversive activity is evident in the work of a number of scholars. For example, Robert Polhemus, in his assessment, roots the comic form deeply in the Christian philosophical milieu. The basic plot of comic form, he says, 'grew out of the process and hope of regeneration.'[163] We have already alluded to Northrop Frye's understanding of the positive nature of comedy, or as he calls it, the 'Mythos of Spring' – a genre that moves toward a happy ending. This broader movement holds within it as one of Frye's six 'phases of comedy' a further more specific movement from the normal world to a green world and back again. This green world, Frye says, 'charges the comedies with the symbolism of the victory of summer over winter.'[164] The audience or reader is, in tracing this journey, prepared to enter into the resolution or, as Frye himself puts it, the redemption of the comic narrative. Comedy, for Frye is part of a grander redemptive strategy which overcomes all obstacles and indeed, in many instances, mirrors the structure of the central Christian myth.

Maintaining this overarching theme, Murphy has interpreted Frye's assessment of the comedic mode as:

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[162] I am grateful to Professor David Jasper for this resonant expression.

[163] Robert Polhemus, *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 17.

[164] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 184-5.

[A]n upward moving **U**. In its downward graph – the first stroke of the **U** -
the plot moves away from a good situation and toward conflict and
suffering. In its upward-graph, the second stroke, the plot turns toward
happiness and communal festivity.[165]

Recognising the importance of the classic comedic upturn (the happy ending) and
without wishing to be pedantic, I wish to extend Murphy's **U** analogy by pointing out
the open-endedness of that particular image. The origin and end of the **U** may be
regarded as indeterminate, and, as Terry Eagleton wittily puts it, 'sheer pointlessness
is a deeply subversive affair.'[166] It is just such open-endeness that, even in the face of
apparent resolution, the comic mode illustrates. It is at this ever-open space where we
witness Fielding's comedy become for us a subversive comedy of life itself.

But what constitutes this subversive comedy of life? What is Fielding's comedic
understanding, and does it resonate with anything of what has been discussed thus
far? Fielding, in the Covent-Garden Journal of 1752, indicated how difficult the
comedic was to analyse objectively:

Of all Kinds of Writing, there is none on which […] Variety of Opinions
is so common as in those of Humour, as perhaps there is no Word in our
Language of which Men have in general so vague and indeterminate an
Idea.[167]

Fielding's assessment is a sound one in that the understanding of humour as an artistic
tool or style had, by the time he came to write, no fixed form. The very subjective
nature of the form engendered a plethora of opinions both artistic and
philosophical.[168] Fielding, in a later essay, remarks with some frustration that writers

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[165] Francesca Aran Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 4.
[166] Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 39.
[167] Henry Fielding, *Covent-Garden Journal and A Plan of the Universal Register Office*, ed. by
Bertrand A. Goldgar (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 130. Hereafter, *Covent-Garden Journal*.
[168] For example, in Hobbes' *Leviathan* we read that the passion known as *Sudden Glory* is defined as
'the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused by some sudden act of
their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by
comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.' Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard
Tuck, rev. edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 43.

such as William Congreve (1670-1729) appear able to explain the nature of the comedic despite protesting otherwise:

> Some of these have spoken of the Word Humour, as if it contained in it some Mystery impossible to be revealed, and no one, as I know of, hath undertaken to shew us expressly what it is… But what is more surprizing is, that we find it pretty well explained in Authors who at the same Time tell us, they know not what it is.[169]

In the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding attempts to more sharply focus his rather laboured description of his 'comic Epic-Poem in prose' by arguing that comedy must focus its attention upon the 'ridiculous'. He then advances to define what he means:

> The only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation… Now, affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy: for as vanity puts us on affecting false characters, in order to purchase applause; so hypocrisy sets us on an endeavour to avoid censure, by concealing our vices, under an appearance of their opposite virtues. And though these two causes are often confounded (for there is some difficulty in distinguishing them), yet as they proceed from very different motives, so they are clearly distinct in their operations: for indeed, the affectation which arises from vanity is nearer to truth than the other, as it hath not that violent repugnancy of nature to struggle with, which that of the hypocrite hath […] From the discovery of this affectation arises the Ridiculous, which always strikes the reader with surprise and pleasure.[170]

Given that Fielding is clearly guided by Aristotelian paradigms[171] and is also writing, albeit warily, within the Augustan tradition, can we nonetheless bring another

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[169] *Covent-Garden Journal*, p. 298.

[170] *Joseph Andrews*, pp. 6-7.

[171] Aristotle, in the *Poetics* writes: 'Comedy is […] an imitation of inferior people – not, however, with respect to every kind of defect: the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful. The laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction; for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not involve pain.' Aristotle, *Poetics*, 3.4.9. See also my discussion of comedy and mask, below.

hermeneutical strategy to bear upon his approach to comedy? Is it possible to discern in Fielding's fiction the same traces of frailty that lie at the heart of a comedic metaphysics? I believe so. The quotation offered above illustrates for us just those qualities of subversion which breaks down the heavenly/bodily dichotomy and which prohibits any move towards a broader epistemological vision. The key term for Fielding is *affectation*. This clearly lends itself to the same kind of analysis outlined earlier. For affectation brings with it resonances of 'show' or 'performance' which can be supplemented by and contrasted with terms such as 'concealment' or 'disguise'. Affectation in itself becomes, in Derridean parlance, a binary opposite. No doubt other expressions may be found to augment the ones already offered – 'reality' and 'unreality' immediately spring to mind – but the point is clear that, for Fielding, the source of the Ridiculous and thus the root of comedy lies in the subverting nature of language within the frailty of lived human experience. Affectation is an act and yet it is not. It is a performance and yet the individual in so performing is revealed as real to the point of transparency.

The comedy in all of this, Fielding reminds us, is precisely in our coming to awareness of this state of affairs. This awareness smacks not of a simple transfer of intellectual information – it is a veritable revelation which is attended with visceral surprise and pleasure. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that we, as readers, actively enter into this revelation. The revelation becomes our activity and as a result the affectation which we ourselves assumed as passive receptors is exposed in our active response to the text. In other words, in our reading we are subversively called to the comedy of life.[172]

Such an assessment is clearly in line with a critical tradition that has its source in Aristotelian poetics, which itself is closely linked to Plato's argument in the *Philebus* that comedy stems from a recognition of self-limitation or as we have described it throughout this study, human frailty. So in summing up his argument, Socrates states:

> In the strong, ignorance of self is odious and repulsive – it and its
> counterfeit presentiments are injurious to a man's neighbour as well as to

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[172] For further elucidation upon revelation, see Chapter 6.

himself; - where it is weak, we see the proper place and true character of the comic.[173]

In contrast to Plato's dismissive attitude towards comedy, we find that, in Aristotle, there is a concern to see that comedy is utilised justly. As we noted above, Aristotle seeks to forensically determine the content and purposes of comedy. His assessment is that true comedy demands that it not be used gratuitously to the extent that it causes pain.[174] This concern for justice implies the very resolution that Frye and, in his subverted way, Fielding himself, have outlined for us above.

We will, in due course, look more specifically at this notion of comedic justice,[175] but at this stage I wish simply to assess how writers in the eighteenth century constituted comedy. Thereafter we will seek to ask ourselves the question: Just how happy are Fielding's happy endings? To lead us there, however, we must firstly discern two critical motifs in the eighteenth century understanding of the comedic which will, I believe, resonate not only with Fielding's own understanding but also with our guiding notion of misplacement.

Comedy and Balance

The first of these motifs is that of the humours. It is, of course, to the ancient physician Galen (AD 129-99) that we trace our understanding of the humours. The healthy body, it was believed, was regulated by four essential humours or, more strictly, fluids – blood, phlegm, black bile and choler. These fluids, for the body to remain healthy, had to be held in balance. Any imbalance in these humours led to disease. It was but a short step from this physiological analysis to apply the activity of the humours to the sphere of the psyche. As a result, one can assign particular humours to particular psychological traits. Stott summarises the possibilities:

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[173] Plato, *Philebus*, trans. by A.E. Taylor (London: Nelson, 1956), p. 169.
[174] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 3.4.9.
[175] See Chapter 5.

A preponderance of blood produced sanguinity, or a brave, hopeful, and amorous disposition; too much phlegm resulted in apathy; black bile led to melancholia; and disproportionate choler caused irascibility and hot-headedness.[176]

Such graphic clinical diagnoses were taken up to apply to the practice of comedy. So we find William Congreve explain:

Thô I make a Difference betwixt *Wit* and *Humour*; yet I do not think that Humorous Characters exclude Wit: No, but the Manner of *Wit* should be adapted to the *Humour*. As for Instance, a Character of a Splenetik and Peevish Humour, should have a Satyrical Wit. A Jolly and Sanguine Humour, should have a Facetious Wit.[177]

What lies behind Congreve's graphic yet, (one supposes given Galen's massive influence), traditional remarks is that there is, in the execution of comedy, a balance to be struck. It is with this notion of balance that we are most concerned here. Despite the obvious competing critical claims for comedy that Fielding has alluded to, a clear suggestion which persists amongst most critics and exponents of the form is its relationship to this concept of balance. An example of just such balance, which was considered critical in the execution of comedy, is witnessed in the desire of many of the poets and dramatists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century for the promotion of virtue and the concomitant restraining of excess. A useful example of this tendency is the distinction to which John Dryden (1631-1700), amongst others, drew attention, namely that between high and low comedy. For Dryden, although he concedes that his assessment is entirely subjective, it is high comedy which is to be considered superior based as it is upon an understanding of wit that had developed throughout the previous century. As Gelber puts it:

Wit increasingly came to stand not for broad intellectual gifts or skill in the major literary genres but a talent of a different order: a capacity for

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[176] Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 45.
[177] William Congreve, *A Letter to John Dennis, concerning Humour in Comedy*, reproduced in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, ed. by D. J. Palmer (London Macmillan, 1984), p. 40.

ingenuity, an ability to make unexpected unions or contrasts of generally diverse ideas.[178]

For Dryden, the exercise of such wit led to high comedy which inspired 'a pleasure that is more noble'. By contrast, low comedy aimed at 'natural imitation' and observed 'only what is ridiculous'. One can see straightaway how Dryden differs from Fielding in this high/low distinction. Fielding, as we have noted, aims directly at the ridiculous. But he sees a high motive which lies behind this comedy, namely the exposure of vanity. We will, in due course, focus upon the ethical dimension that this notion of comedic balance offers us, but in the meantime it is sufficient for us to recognise the broader implications.

It would appear from this disparity between Fielding and Dryden above, that any notion of balance, be it based upon the physiological or psychological humours themselves or upon any critical taxonomy, is actually an illusion. One can, with the benefit of hindsight, recognise the futility of effecting any kind of resolution to the assessment of comedy. In the same way that the heavenly/bodily dichotomy failed, so here at the critical level with the rise of the novel, no apparatus can be provided which will succeed in confining the purposes of comedy. The high/low distinction favoured by Dryden merely serves to show the subjective variances and downright critical prejudices that exist at the artistic level. Fielding himself was, of course, subject to these variances but, I suggest, was as unaware in his fiction of his flouting them as he was in his more critical writings, of expounding them. This has implications for the entire project of resolution which, in many ways, is the *raison d' être* of the comic novel, viz. the happy ending, as we shall shortly examine.

Comedy and Mask

The second motif I wish to adopt in our study of comedy is that of mask. Terry Castle has argued that the overriding form of Fielding's presentation of the masquerade is the *carnival moralisé* – 'it stands as the living emblem of a wider decay, a theatre of

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[178] Michael Werth Gelber, 'Dryden's Theory of Comedy', *Eighteenth Century Studies* 26, no.2 (1992-1993 Winter), 261-83.

excess in which modern society enacts its own perversity.'[179] It is a motif that Fielding had used in his 'An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men' (1739-40) where it becomes the summation of a ruinous society. At the very least it is an indicator of the idea 'that Man is a deceitful Animal':

> The whole World becomes a vast Masquerade, where the greatest Part appear disguised under false Vizors and Habits; a very few only shewing their true Faces, who become, by so doing, the Astonishment and Ridicule of the rest.[180]

This forms part of his somewhat static theological assessment of human virtue and vice.[181]

What is interesting, however, is just how such static characterisation is transformed in Fielding's fiction. Those theological types, which fitted so easily in the formal setting of a didactic essay, find themselves destabilised in the less controllable fictional arena. It is as if the characters themselves, when given room to breathe, actually inhale a less rarefied mixture in order to carry on existing. Fielding hints as much in his early poem, *The Masquerade* (1728) where we read of those 'Who masque the Face, t'unmasque the Mind'.[182] But this is more clearly in evidence in *Tom Jones* where, in the chapter entitled *Containing the Whole Humours of the Masquerade* (XIII.vii), we find what, at first glance, appears to be a similar didactic frame of reference. We are presented with a title which purports to encapsulate the whole sordid nature of the masquerade. Indeed, the masquerade in the title is here personified and is linked to those humours mentioned earlier. Tom's disappointment at failing to meet with his beloved Sophia at the masquerade suggests to us that those distractions offered by the masquerade as 'Antidotes against the Spleen' (XIII.vii.461)

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[179] Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 190.

[180] Henry Fielding, 'An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men' in *Miscellanies* Vol. I, ed. by Henry Knight Miller (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 155.

[181] In the 'Essay' noted above, Fielding adopts such characters as 'the Flatterer', 'the Professor', the Promise' and typically, 'the Saint'. By the time Fielding is acting in his position as magistrate, he is recorded on at least two occasions leading a band of officers to break up a masquerade, before examining them. See Martin C. Battestin with Ruthe R. Battestin, *Henry Fielding: A Life* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 502-503; 522-523.

[182] Henry Fielding, *The Masquerade* in *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon, Shamela, and Occasional Writings*, ed. by Martin Battestin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.14-27 (p. 17).

are revealed for the shallow entertainments they are. Fielding goes further and adopts an ironic theological motif describing the opening scene:

> Our Cavaliers now arrived at that Temple, where *Heydegger*, the great *Arbiter Deliciarum*, the great High Priest of Pleasure presides, and, like other Heathen Priests, imposes on his Votaries by the pretended Presence of the Deity, when in Reality no such Deity is there.[183]

The masquerade here becomes an embodiment of that other great revel from the Old Testament – The Worship of the Golden Calf. Here, too, we are presented with an empty deity. While the true God is hidden with his true representative, the sensuous, tactile false god provides the relief the masses crave.

And yet, for all the obvious points of didactic resonance, there remains in this chapter a measure of ambivalence. This is obviously an inevitable consequence of the subject matter itself. The masquerade is defined by hiddenness. The ontology of the masquerade is, as it were, compromised by its very existence. What allows Fielding to demarcate the masquerade in this chapter actually and, paradoxically, releases the masquerade to be the enigmatic cipher that it is. Castle argues that it is Fielding's use of the masquerade in a broader plot structure which secures its ambivalent status. Though this suggestion fulfils the traditional requirement of the building of narrative tension which thus provides a final comic resolution, there lies a deeper ontological implication of masquerade itself, namely that fiction (itself a masquerade) can escape its own supposed confines.

This 'escape' occurs at the more obvious level of character as Castle points out:

> Like a kind of textual vortex…[the fictional representation of the masquerade] is that locale through which the characters cannot pass without exposing what is *un*characteristic – how they differ, as it were, from themselves.[184]

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[183] *Tom Jones*, XIII.vii.460.
[184] Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization*, p. 198.

A good example is to be found in *Amelia*, where it can be legitimately argued that the motif of the mask plays a central role. Early in the story, we find Booth in prison and we are introduced to Blear-Eyed Moll, a prostitute who has lost her nose (most likely through syphilis). The fact that we later discover that Booth's own wife, the saintly Amelia, also has a damaged nose, provides us with a disturbing symmetry. As a result of her accident ('the overturning of a chaise'), Amelia has for a time to wear a mask and Booth recounts the incident for us:

> We were alone together, and I begged her to indulge my curiosity by shewing me her face. She answered in a most obliging manner, "Perhaps, Mr Booth, you will as little know me when my mask is off as when it is on;" and at the same instant unmasked. – The surgeon's skill was the least I considered. A thousand tender ideas rushed all at once on my mind. I was unable to contain myself, and eagerly kissing her hand, I cried – "Upon my soul, madam, you never looked so lovely as at this instant."[185]

Fig. 1.

Henry Fielding, frontispiece to Fielding's Works (1st ed., 1762),
engraving by James Basire after a drawing by William Hogarth
Courtesy of the trustees of the British Museum; photograph, J.R. Freeman & Co., Ltd

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[185] Henry Fielding, *Amelia*, II.1.59, ed. by David Blewett (London: Penguin, 1987). Hereafter, *Amelia*.

Amelia's apparently self-deprecating remark provides, firstly, a dark commentary on Booth's own inability to discern character behind the various guises he confronts in life. Booth reveals this piece of information about Amelia in the prison where he has already exhibited a measure of naïveté concerning the identity of his fellow inmates. The fact that he also reveals his tale to the seductive and designing Miss Matthews, with whom he is later to have an assignation, amplifies the sense of Booth's inability to truly encounter the other. This inability, as we shall note later, even extends to his contact with God.[186]

Secondly, and more disturbingly, Amelia's comment leaves us wondering about Amelia herself. Do we, indeed, ever reach beyond her mask in this novel? She is repeatedly revered as virtuous and in various terms, 'the finest woman in England' and yet does that very virtue not present us with a disguise? Her decision, for example, not to attend the masquerade on moral grounds and in her stead to send Mrs Atkinson, (who is subsequently mistaken by everyone including Booth for Amelia), surely points to a guile that does not chime with the traditional view of her.[187]

She is described by the devout Dr Harrison (the 'divine policeman' as Amory calls him),[188] as 'an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile'.[189] On the face of it, this appears to be a compliment and yet Nathaniel, the first recipient of this epithet, instead of being a faith-filled individual, is presented as someone who is sceptical regarding Jesus's credentials – 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'[190] Here in the gospel and, by extension, in *Amelia*, itself, we are presented with a somewhat murkier presentation of character.

This ambiguity extends to the transmission of Amelia's own religious experience. We are told that she 'never let a day pass, without instructing her children in some lesson

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[186] See below, p. 113f.
[187] John Coolidge draws our attention to the question as to how innocent Amelia can be if she has to genuinely counter evil. He asks, 'Can good admit the participation of evil without ceasing to be itself?' John Coolidge, 'Fielding and "Conservation of Character"', *Modern Philology* 57 (1959-60), 245-259, (p. 253).
[188] Amory, Hugh, 'Magistrat or Censor? The Problem of Authority in Fielding's Later Writings', *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 12, no. 3 (1972 Summer), 503-18 (p. 513).
[189] *Amelia*, IX.8.395, quoting John 1. 47.
[190] John 1. 46.

of religion and morality'.[191] And yet, later in the novel, when Dr. Harrison enters into conversation with one of the Booth children regarding forgiveness, we learn that things are not so straight-forward:

> Whilst Booth and his wife were feasting their souls with the most delicious mutual endearments, the doctor was fallen to play with the two little children below-stairs. While he was thus engaged the little boy did somewhat amiss; upon which the doctor said, 'If you do so any more I will take your papa away from you again.' – 'Again! sir,' said the child; 'why, was it you then that took away my papa before?' 'Suppose it was,' said the doctor; 'would not you forgive me?' 'Yes,' cries the child, 'I would forgive you; because a Christian must forgive everybody; but I should hate you as long as I live.'
>
> The doctor was so pleased with the boy's answer, that he caught him in his arms and kissed him; at which time Booth and his wife returned. The doctor asked which of them was their son's instructor in his religion; Booth answered that he must confess Amelia had all the merit of that kind. 'I should have rather thought he had learnt of his father,' cries the doctor; 'for he seems a good soldier-like Christian, and professes to hate his enemies with a very good grace.'
>
> 'How, Billy!' cries Amelia. 'I am sure I did not teach you so.'
>
> 'I did not say I would hate my enemies, madam,' cries the boy; 'I only said I would hate papa's enemies. Sure, mamma, there is no harm in that; nay, I am sure there is no harm in it, for I have heard you say the same thing a thousand times.'[192]

Prior to discussing the substantive issue this passage reveals, we notice immediately the carnal setting within which it is set. We discover, here, a favourite ploy of Fielding, namely the placing of a spiritual interaction against a very physical one. Harrison and the child are deep in theological cogitation below, while Booth and Amelia are 'feasting their souls' in an altogether different fashion above. This

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[191] *Amelia*, IV.4.162.
[192] *Amelia*, IX.9.365-6.

theological/carnal mirroring becomes itself a kind of mask which paradoxically reveals the equivocal nature of the discussion on forgiveness itself.

Moving to the conversation between Dr. Harrison and the boy, we are left somewhat confused as to the content and extent of Amelia's religious influence. Fielding allows us to speculate in the person of Dr. Harrison as to precisely who is the teacher of such a lusty form of Christianity. Harrison attributes the boy's response regarding hatred of enemies to the influence of Booth, but we discover from the boy himself that, in fact, it is Amelia who has encouraged her son in this spiritual direction, a direction which flies in the face of any traditional form of Christian charity that we would assume Amelia would choose to inculcate. Jill Campbell attributes this scenario to a patriarchal motive when she writes:

> Amelia's personal authority as a living paragon of Christian virtue, her active, persuasive power over others is radically circumscribed and ultimately dependent on the authority of men, whose characteristic values of military or classical virtue strangely mix and meld with the Christian wisdom Amelia herself is allowed to purvey.[193]

In other words, it is Fielding's Christianity which has intervened here. Amelia, according to Campbell, merely becomes the channel by which this muscular faith is disseminated. However, I would suggest that this is to minimize the depth of ambiguity that this passage offers. It seems too easy, in the face of Amelia's apparent inconsistency, to transplant Fielding (or 'patriarchal belief') into that worrisome state of affairs. Instead, we should recognise that, in this important respect, Amelia is as much affected by mask as anyone else in the novel. She becomes the personification, not of a muscular Christianity, but of the unstable truth that there is no single unalloyed understanding of forgiveness that is expressed in *Amelia*. We are confronted with an unsettling many-faceted (many-masked) comedic Christianity (what Rawson describes as a '"serious" reconstitution of the comic')[194] which defies fundamental analysis.

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[193] Jill Campbell, *Natural Masques: Gender and Identity in Fielding's Plays and Novels* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 239.

[194] Claude Rawson, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress*, p. 93.

Indeed, one might go further and suggest that Amelia provides us with such a display of ambiguity that she becomes almost ethereal. She is not, like Richardson's eponymous Clarissa, a protestant martyr bent on moral incorruption via bodily decay. Rather, Amelia is, in a sense, a masked martyr insofar as it is impossible to penetrate the veneer of spirituality which shapes her. This is not to suggest that her spirituality or character is superficial. If anything, it is quite the opposite. She is a spiritual cipher, and in the strictest sense of that word, a spiritual zero which becomes a vital key in our coming to terms with Amelia as an individual and this work as truly postmodern.

One of Fielding's more illustrious and avid readers, Immanuel Kant, recognising the duplicity which takes place in so-called virtuous society, was led to write, 'on the whole, the more civilised human beings are, the more they are actors.'[195] Kant appears to regard this 'naturally implanted willing self-deceit' as nothing more than a necessary evil out of which a more virtuous society can develop. Masking, for Kant becomes a moral training.

By contrast, however, Castle proffers a less sanguine understanding, when she indicates how relationships and, indeed, society itself is subverted by the masquerade:

> The masquerade provokes a revelation – the unmasking – of hidden potentiality in the fictional world. It is that stage upon which the individual loses his or her incorrigible specificity – and the textual site at which the disparate stories of self and other merge, and become indistinguishable.[196]

Stott offers an overarching historical gloss to all of this when he points to the post Civil War disillusionment with absolute order of whatever colour. He writes:

> Authority had disgraced itself, it seemed, and sincerity and conviction were currencies debased by ideology. […] This would account for the centrality of artifice and 'playing' as themes in the comedy of this era,

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[195] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. by Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 42.
[196] Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization*, p. 249.

confirmed by its extravagant use of masks, disguises, impersonations and subterfuges that focus attention on the theme of credibility.[197]

Both of the above, it would seem, tell only a part of the story. It is the story itself that is subverted by masquerade. It is not merely character that is thrown into the vortex, it is plot too, and more than this, fictionality itself. It is, all of it, misplaced through the ontological filter of the masquerade. Neither, too, can we be confined by a purely historical analysis. Both Stott and Castle seem content merely to describe the immediate effects of masquerade within a particular literary or historical context. I would go further and suggest that it is the notion of credibility itself which is exposed in the fictional world as incredible.

A stunning and theological example of this is found in *Amelia* in the form of a sermon delivered at the Masquerade at which both Booth and Amelia attend. The sermon itself is in the form of a letter which has been sent by the saintly Dr. Harrison to the scheming Colonel James. However, the letter is misplaced by him and finds itself on the floor of the Haymarket Opera House in which the masquerade is taking place. The letter/sermon is subsequently picked up by some rakish fellows who proceed to deliver it to the assembled throng:

> 'Here beginneth the first chapter of – Saint – Pox on't, Jack, what is the saint's name? I have forgot.'
> 'Timothy, you blockhead,' answer'd another – 'Timothy.'
> 'Well, then,' cries the orator, 'of Saint Timothy.'[198]

We realise at once that Saint Timothy is not actually referred to in the sermon (it is in the form of a letter after all), but he is invoked by the orator as the patron saint of drunks.[199] The rake proceeds to expound with great vigour against the social and personal dangers of adultery, and after fourteen rowdily interrupted paragraphs, comes to the end of the 'dismal ditty'. Fielding, here, extends the mask motif to cover

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[197] Stott, *Comedy*, p. 56.
[198] *Amelia*, X.2.418.
[199] St. Timothy was invoked in order to alleviate stomach upsets, hence the association with alcohol. See Alison Jones, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Saints* (Ware, Herts: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1995), p. 220.

the nature of text itself. Indeed, he goes as far as he can in this regard, given that he uses as his text that which ordinarily would, of course, have no place at such an occasion, but also in that he disguises it in the shape of a dramatic and sensual address delivered by the most unlikely of preachers. The mask becomes, then, an exemplar of misplacement, a parting with the ineffable, insofar as that which is seen as sacred is rhetorically reduced or weakened. The result of such misplacement in this case is that the power that inheres in the text is exploited in an atmosphere which, to say the least, would be considered uncongenial. Johnson, focussing upon the moral implications of this writes:

> For both the imaginary Dr. Harrison and Fielding the magistrate and moralist, the sermon at the masquerade was a serious exhortation directed at the private and public conscience. For Fielding the novelist, the sermon at the masquerade is also an amusing incident, an ingenious device, and a manifestation of the constructive power of genius. It is the feigning of a moral masquerade.[200]

I would go further than Johnson, here, and eliminate the distinction he casually makes between Fielding 'the magistrate and moralist' and Fielding 'the novelist'. For surely, one can extend the effect of masquerade to those very roles of 'magistrate', 'moralist' and 'novelist' that Johnson would seek to so firmly ascribe. What Fielding does in this passage (and Johnson recognises) is that we are left floundering as to the nature of both fiction and reality. Which parts of the sermon are we to take seriously? All of it? None of it? How do we detect that element of truth behind the comic façade which surrounds it? This is the genius of Fielding in this passage which, in the space of a short sermon, breaks open the unfixability of human experience. In this respect the sermon has a deadly comedic effect.[201]

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[200] Maurice Johnson, *Fielding's Act of Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1961), p. 164.
[201] One recognises, here, the affinities with the epistolary novels of Richardson and particularly *Clarissa* where the vehicle of correspondence not only heightens psychological tension but more specifically illustrates the risks of misplaced trust.

A further example found in *Joseph Andrews* involves the masking of sermon as theatrical production. Parson Adams, desperate to sell his sermons, finds himself confronting a potential buyer in the shape of a world-weary bookseller:

As soon as he had seated himself, the stranger began in these words: 'Sir, I do not care absolutely to deny engaging in what my friend Mr Barnabas recommends; but sermons are mere drugs. The trade is so vastly stocked with them, that really, unless they come out with the name of Whitefield or Wesley, or some other such great man, as a bishop, or those sort of people, I don't care to touch; unless now it was a sermon preached on the 30th of January; or we could say in the title-page, published at the earnest request of the congregation, or the inhabitants; but, truly, for a dry piece of sermons, I had rather be excused; especially as my hands are so full at present. However, sir, as Mr Barnabas mentioned them to me, I will, if you please, take the manuscript with me to town, and send you my opinion of it in a very short time.'

'Oh!' said Adams, 'if you desire it, I will read two or three discourses as a specimen.' This Barnabas, who loved sermons no better than a grocer doth figs, immediately objected to, and advised Adams to let the bookseller have his sermons: telling him, 'If he gave him a direction, he might be certain of a speedy answer;' adding, he need not scruple trusting them in his possession. 'No,' said the bookseller, 'if it was a play that had been acted twenty nights together, I believe it would be safe.'

Adams did not at all relish the last expression; he said 'he was sorry to hear sermons compared to plays.' 'Not by me, I assure you,' cried the bookseller, 'though I don't know whether the licensing act may not shortly bring them to the same footing; but I have formerly known a hundred guineas given for a play.' – 'More shame for those who gave it,' cried Barnabas. – 'Why so?' said the bookseller, 'for they got hundreds by it.' – 'But is there no difference between conveying good or ill instructions to mankind?' said Adams: 'Would not an honest mind rather lose money by the one, than gain it by the other?' – 'If you can find any such, I will not

be their hindrance,' answered the bookseller; 'but I think those persons who get by preaching sermons are the properest to lose by printing them: for my part, the copy that sells best will be always the best copy in my opinion; I am no enemy to sermons, but because they don't sell: for I would as soon print one of Whitefield's as any farce whatever.'[202]

There is, of course, a specific historico-theological context here insofar as George Whitefield (1714-70) is seen as the target for Fielding's humour. Methodist preachers, like Whitefield and John Wesley (1703-91), were widely regarded as an unwelcome and dangerous diversion (much like the unlicensed theatres of the period) for working people. To this end, a number of satirical drawings and poems were produced making the comparison between Methodist activities and the theatre or, more specifically, the pantomime (see Fig 2. below).

Fig. 2.

Minister dressed as Harlequin. Detail from *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism*, (1762) William Hogarth
Image courtesy of
THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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[202] *Joseph Andrews*, I.17.63-64.

John O'Brien spells out the blurring of the boundaries between the entertainment industry and religion:

> Now, religion was perceived to be following the example of the entertainment culture it had once excoriated, appealing to the masses by mimicking the theatre, and by this means moving into its physical, conceptual and psychic spaces.[203]

However, the deeper point being made here in *Joseph Andrews* is that the sermon (and possibly other religious activity) can be regarded as not only entertainment, but in a certain sense, fictional. It becomes an artifice which can be sold like any other artistic commodity. This does not imply (as Adams believes) a cheapening of the sermon. Rather, it is suggestive of the very ambivalence of so-called religious language and of what that language purports to display and ultimately achieve.

The masquerade becomes, then, an important example of the subversive activity of comedy. In the work of fiction, and particularly comic fiction, the boundary between the physical and the metaphysical becomes translucent. In the comic we are carried beyond the ontological, beyond the realm of being, beyond concepts of reality and unreality.

In this regard, we find that Peter Berger, in his *Redeeming Laughter*, helpfully teases out some of this unsettling activity of comedy. He describes the work of humour as an intrusion which 'conjures up a *separate world* different from the world of ordinary reality, operating by different rules'.[204] We are here, of course, led back immediately to Bakhtin and to our heavenly/bodily dichotomy. There is in the work of comedy a danger of uncontrollability or excess. Such a danger has resonances with the Dionysian or Bacchian cults. This association by itself can account for the negative reaction of the church authorities to expressions of mirth which we outlined earlier in this chapter. However, I do not wish to remain fixated, as it were, upon the associative dangers of the comic. Rather, I would seek to get to the heart of what it is that leads us

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[203] John O'Brien, *Harlequin Britain: Pantomime and Entertainment, 1690-1760* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 180.

[204] Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1997), p. x.

to suggest that comedy is itself misplacement – a parting with the ineffable. It is here that we enter into the contrariness of the comic metaphysic.

Pharmakomedy

Baudelaire in his essay, *Of the Essence of Laughter*, after amusingly outlining the orthodox position on the lapsarian roots of laughter, points out the profound contradictions inherent in the comedic experience of humanity:

> Laughter is satanic; it is therefore profoundly human. In man it is the consequence of his idea of his own superiority; and in fact, since laughter is essentially human it is essentially contradictory, that is to say it is at one and the same time a sign of infinite greatness and of infinite wretchedness, infinite wretchedness in relation to the absolute being, of who man has an inkling, infinite greatness in relation to the beasts. It is from the constant clash of these two infinities that laughter flows.[205]

Baudelaire here follows, at first blush, the Aristotelian understanding of the comic in that laugher is appropriate insofar as it exposes the weakness of the other. However, he clearly goes further in utilising laughter as a kind of generic glue, by which the demonic is tightly bonded with the human. What does this mean? And more significantly, how can we hold this in the light of Baudelaire's subsequent statement that 'the comic dwells in us Christians'?[206]

A means to resolve this apparent tension can be found in the term *pharmakon* and its synonyms which Derrida has taken up from Plato's writings, chiefly the *Phaedrus*.[207] The word can hold within itself a pair of apparently contradictory meanings, namely 'medicine' or 'poison' and 'wizard' or 'scapegoat'. Derrida utilises this etymological ambiguity to stress the binary oppositions which are inherent in language itself. For our purposes, however, it is useful to specifically apply the term *pharmakon* to the

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[205] Charles Baudelaire, 'Of the Essence of Laughter', in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. by P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 148.
[206] Ibid., p. 150.
[207] Derrida's discussion is found in *Dissemination*, pp. 63-171.

realm of the comedic and to the work of the comedian. Applying Derrida's methodological approach, one can see that the comedic can be regarded as a source of both health and disease, of pleasure and pain, of life and death. Comedy in this binary sense, then, transcends the individual positive or negative categories which would otherwise seek to confine its activity. By its gently insidious nature it can override the realities we care to set up and thereby inhabit the *separate world* which we have been alluding to. It is this 'transcendence in a lower key' as Berger describes it, which enables comedy to break the chains of the rational and truly enter into the realms of the metaphysical.

However, at the risk of appearing either pedantic or obfuscatory, it is important to stress that this 'transcendence in a lower key' also works, as it were, in the opposite direction. Not only are we to recognise the ineffable glory beyond or behind the fragile nature of the comedic, we are also brought to see the fragile glory of the human condition which, at all times, is confronted by the ineffable nature of the comedic.

Recognising this, we can then say with Baudelaire that laughter (or comedy) is both satanic and human. It is, as Blake would have it 'of the devil's party' and, at the same time, it offers not only insight into human nature, but a temporary suspension of the vicissitudes of life to the extent that it can offer the potential at least for an experience of joy. And, of course, it is at this point that the comedic and the religious come into close contact.

The risk of comedy can be described as similar to the Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith'. Indeed, one can trace in Kierkegaard that this gulf between finitude and infinitude is what constitutes comedy itself:

> What lies at the root of both the comic and the tragic in this connection, is the discrepancy, the contradiction, between the infinite and the finite, the eternal and that which becomes.[208]

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[208] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David F. Swenson & Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), pp. 82-83.

The fact that comedy points to another world, a separate sphere, however fleetingly, open us to a choice. The choice exits because there is, it would appear, something for us to perceive as comedic. As Berger puts it:

> The subjective aspect [of the comic phenomenon] is intended by what is commonly called a sense of humour… This is the capacity to perceive something as comical or funny. But there is also a putative objectivity in this perception. That is, there is the assumption that there is *something out there*, something outside one's own mind, that is comical.[209]

That 'something out there' is paradoxically co-existent with an awareness of the incongruity of lived experience. In other words, it is through the comedic that we come to recognise the other. And, of course, it is here that we are brought round once more to the focus of Henry Fielding's own comedy, namely HUMAN NATURE itself. This we can also examine through the unlikely filter of Derrida's ambiguous *pharmakon*.

Having established comedy's relationship with the transcendent, we can at once see how the work of the comedian can be regarded as potentially sacramental or even magical. Derrida recognised the irony in the fact that Socrates who had railed against the *pharmakon* of writing was himself condemned as *pharmakos* – wizard, magician, poisoner. We are also reminded, too, of Plato's less than sympathetic attitude to the poets of his day.

Poisoning Plato

In the *Phaedrus*, we are given the impression that the artist is a special kind of sophist who beguiles and pretends to 'doctor's talk'. Plato feared the instability of poetic inspiration, describing it as a kind of divine or holy madness.[210] The focus of art is not the simple or the good but what is earthy and complex, as Murdoch states:

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[209] Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, p. 208.
[210] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244-5, trans. by R. Hackforth, in *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. by Edith Hamilton and Huntingdon Cairns (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969).

Purity, simplicity, truthfulness and the absence of pretence or pretension are the marks of sound art, and such art is universally understood, as are simple folk tales and moral stories. Ordinary people know instinctively that art becomes degraded unless it is kept simple.[211]

Beauty and art are, for Plato two separate spheres. The former is to be honoured, the latter suspected. Without entering too deeply into Plato's reasoning here, we can at least do no better than hear Iris Murdoch's assessment, not least for its resonance with my thesis:

Art as the great general universal informant is an obvious rival, not necessarily a hostile one, to philosophy and indeed to science, and Plato never did justice to the truth-conveying capacities of art…Art, especially literature, is a great hall of reflection where we can all meet and where everything under the sun can be examined and considered. For this reason it is feared and attacked by dictators, and by authoritarian moralists… Plato feared the consolations of art. He did not offer a consoling theology... To present the idea of God at all, even as myth, is a consolation, since it is impossible to defend this image against the prettifying attentions of art. Art will mediate and adorn, and develop magical structures to conceal the absence of God or his distance… Sophistry and magic break down at intervals, but they never go away and there is no end to their collusion with art and to the consolation which… they can provide.[212]

Ironically, Plato, himself, becomes a figure of comedy in Iris Murdoch's *Fire and Sun* where she explains that Plato, in the *Republic* did not in fact banish all the poets, but merely suggested that they be politely escorted to the border![213]

Plato is, of course, highly regarded by Fielding but this in itself does not hinder him from poking fun at the philosopher. In the dedication of *Tom Jones* to his old school

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[211] Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 17.
[212] Ibid., pp. 85-6.
[213] Ibid., p. 1.

friend, benefactor and Member of Parliament, George Lyttelton, Fielding defends his main purpose 'to recommend Goodness and Innocence'. In this particular apology he marshals Plato into service:

> And to say the Truth, it [the recommendation of Goodness and Innocence] is likeliest to be attained in Books of this Kind; for an Example is a Kind of Picture, in which virtue becomes as it were an Object of Sight, and strikes us with an Idea of that Loveliness, which *Plato* asserts there is in her naked Charms.[214]

The problem with this reference to Plato is that, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato never spoke of 'naked Charms' at all.[215] This has fallen out of Fielding's imagination. One can, of course, argue that it is a genuine misquotation of Plato, after all, there are a number of these misquotations throughout the work. I would, however, suggest that this is a 'deliberate misquotation', a misplaced quotation, which actually subverts the very defence Fielding is attempting to mount. As the Grand Creator, Fielding well knows the content of his own work and such an insertion would chime remarkably well with the robust expressions of sexuality found in the novel. Plato, then, the lover of Form who saw the flesh as 'mortal trash' (*Symposium* 211) is implicated in the very fleshliness he would seek to deny.

Later in the novel, we find another instance of Plato being comically subverted. In the debate between Mrs Western, her brother Squire Western and Sophia regarding her niece's matrimonial future, Mrs Western in exasperation at what she regards as Sophia's stubbornness at not wishing to marry Blifil, declaims:

> 'Niece, have I not endeavoured to inspire you with a true Idea of the several Relations in which a human Creature stands in Society? Have I not taken infinite Pains to shew you, that the Law of Nature hath enjoined a Duty on children to their Parents? Have I not told you what *Plato* says on that Subject? – A Subject on which you was so notoriously ignorant when

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[214] *Tom Jones*, p. 7.
[215] Plato actually says 'How passionate had been our desire for her [wisdom], if she had given us so clear an image of herself to gaze upon.' *Phaedrus* 250, op. cit., p. 497.

you first came under my Care, that I verily believe you did not know the Relation between a Daughter and a Father.' ''Tis a lie,' answered *Western*. 'The Girl is no such Fool, as to live to eleven Years old without knowing that she was her Father's Relation.'[216]

Mrs Western is earlier described as:

Well skilled in the Doctrine of Amour: A Knowledge she the more easily attained, as her Pursuit of it was never diverted by any Affairs of her own; for either she had no Inclinations, or they had never been solicited; which last is indeed very probable: For her masculine Person, which was near six Foot high, added to her Manner and Learning, possibly prevented the other Sex from regarding her, notwithstanding her Petticoats, in the Light of a Woman.[217]

Mrs Western's skill is of a technical nature. Regardless of her intellectual perspicacity she remains blind to the realities of life and love. She is a perambulatory ivory tower. In other words, she becomes emblematic of the fleshless Puritanism which Plato himself advocated. There is little of the goodness of heart which Fielding desires to communicate to his readers, particularly in the character of the ignorant Squire, who in the above incident serves, as he does elsewhere in the novel, to puncture the pretensions of those who assume to understand fully what is required in any given situation.

Further evidence of this artificial knowledge is to be found in *Joseph Andrews* and once again Plato becomes Fielding's focus. On their discovery of the duplicity of a con-artist whom Parson Adams had believed to be a gentleman set on assisting them, we hear the cleric attempt to understand the subterfuge which on the surface appears pointless:

'What Wickedness is there in the Christian World? I profess, almost equal to what I have read of the *Heathens*. But surely, *Joseph*, your Suspicions

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[216] *Tom Jones*, VII.iii.217.
[217] *Tom Jones*, VI.ii.178.

of this Gentleman must be unjust; for what a silly Fellow must he be, who would do the Devil's work for nothing? And can'st thou tell me any Interest he could possibly propose to himself by deceiving us in his Professions?' 'It is not for me,' answered *Joseph*, 'to give Reasons for what Men do, to a Gentleman of your Learning.' You say right,' quoth *Adams*; 'Knowledge of Men is only to be learnt from Books, *Plato* and *Seneca* for that; and those are Authors, I am afraid Child, you never read.' 'Not I, Sir, truly,' answered *Joseph*; 'all I know is, it is a Maxim among the Gentlemen of our Cloth, that those Masters who promise the most perform the least.'[218]

Indeed, Joseph has not read Plato, but the reality is that he enjoys a greater grasp of the situation as it is than Parson Adams whose whole existence, though enveloped in a joyful and generous innocence, is nonetheless peppered by an artificiality based on paper – the very medium through which Fielding himself seeks to not only understand the world, but earn himself a living.

So we discern running through Fielding's comedy a subtle subversion. Riffaterre obliquely refers to this subversive activity when he writes:

Humour… rests on the existence of another way of seeing or of being that exists prior to the application of its distorting system or lexical grid to that representation.[219]

This is a rather prosaic way to speak about comedy; however, the point is well made. There needs to be a sense of the other in order for comedy to engage in its clandestine activity. That other way of seeing or being which Riffaterre points to is, in my view, another way of describing an awareness of misplacement – the endless possibility that the text and particularly the comic text, provides.

So we recognise that Fielding, in all of the examples mentioned above, is able to both defend and disrupt the Platonic philosophical framework. In the very act of promoting

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[218] *Joseph Andrews*, II.17.138.
[219] Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 41.

Plato he becomes the *pharmakos*, the poisoner or wizard who subverts the structure of a safe society. As we have noted, art for Plato was closely allied to the inferiorities of the body. The *pharmakos* as poisoner must, then, take full account of the body if he is to be successful. At the same time, as wizard or magician, the *pharmakos* must perform the miraculous - his work must be in some sense transformative, not merely destructive.

In this way we can discern that, in an important sense, the subversive comedy of Fielding enfleshes the disembodied. Such enfleshing can, indeed, be regarded as sacramental. Ordinary things take upon themselves a refined, reified quality. So, the asexual schema of Plato is overtaken by a vision of sexualized wisdom; the ignorant Western punctures the prognostications of a de-sexualized Platonic disciple, and the unread, worldly Joseph reads the situation more clearly that the well-read, unworldly Adams. In these examples the idealized image of Plato and his philosophical system is the target for Fielding's comedy, but it would be a mistake to reduce the power of Fielding's work to a simple instance of lampooning. What Fielding's comedy does is intoxicate ('poisoner') the hitherto sober and, at the same time, enchant ('wizard') the hitherto mundane. In this sense it is an exemplar of Berger's notion of 'transcendence in a lower key'. Through comedy's very subversive nature, both heaven and earth are joined in a sacramental dance.

Parable, Metaphor and Meaning

In moving to our discussion of the parabolic, we notice at once that the comedic link between *pharmakon* and parable is centred upon a common destabilising function. Given the temptation to look towards the meaning or meanings of parable it is often assumed that in the parable form we are offered an unambiguous hermeneutical platform. So we find Hunter defining parable as:

A comparison drawn from nature or daily life and designed to illuminate some spiritual truth, on the assumption that what is valid in one sphere is valid also on the other.[220]

Again, in his own analysis, C. H. Dodd, while carefully directing us away from the danger of allegorizing in our interpretation of the parabolic, only succeeds in leading us to a 'single point of comparison'.[221] The very avoidance of the perilously wide allegorical path, forces us in Dodd's schema to the apparently safe but narrow alleyway which ultimately tapers to a dead end.

Such exposition fails to do justice to the ambiguity which we find in some of the parables in the Gospels. There is a failure to recognise that parables, at the very least are 'paradoxical, shattering, exploding, and disclosing narratives'.[222] In the parables we are consistently provided with an unsettling view of the universe and the human condition within that universe. The parabolic is a world of injustice, of violence, even of the unhygienic. The characters which dwell in that world are misfits, losers, victims and comedians. This, in itself, is a strong pointer to the definition that David Jasper offers when he states that:

The parable, like all irony, is inherently unstable and destabilising, performing a disjunctive act between its ontological promise (that we may find out something, if only by analogy, about heaven) and its theological overturning.[223]

David Tracy concurs with this analysis and outlines what he regards as the strategy required when approaching the parabolic:

However the parabolic metaphors are interpreted, the exegete must employ some theory of tension or interaction, not a theory of substitution, to understand fully what "The Kingdom of God is like". When the

[220] A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 8.
[221] C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Fontana, 1960), p. 18.
[222] William J. Bausch, *Storytelling Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 2002), p. 117.
[223] David Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 132.

interpreter applies a theory of substitution to the parables, she or he will inevitably either remove the limiting character of the mode of life disclosed by these heuristic fictions or will replace it with an alternative of her or his own theological or ethical choosing.[224]

Nietzsche summed up Tracy's argument many years earlier when he wrote: 'To know is to work with one's favourite metaphors.'[225] In other words, the assumption that we can close off the question, what is truth? or, what is being? is, to say the least, an optimistic one. As Robert Funk has said, 'The parables have a way of thwarting the best laid agendas.'[226] This is because 'parable transcends conceptualization, borders the ineffable, cannot easily be exhausted of meaning. Something is said in the parable, which cannot quite be said another way'.[227]

More recently, Tom Thatcher has discussed this latent ambiguity in the parable form. Thatcher prefers the term 'parable-riddle' as this more adequately suggests the element of incompleteness found in the parable itself. Whereas a parable may, in Dodd's parlance, have a single point of reference, the riddle is far less easy to circumscribe. Bringing parable, then, into the same hermeneutical orbit as riddle, as Thatcher does, generates a far wider field of interpretative possibility. In other words, we are left with a greater sense of the ambiguous nature of the parable form and, at the very least, we can begin to recognise Jeremias' description of the parables as 'weapons of controversy'.[228] I would further suggest that they can equally be described as 'tools of comedy'.

It has been long recognised that these 'weapons' or 'tools' are actually vital examples of metaphor.[229] It is important, therefore, that we briefly reconnoitre the semantic territory around this particular form before we look at how Fielding uses parable in

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[224] David Tracy, 'Metaphor and Religion', in *On Metaphor*, ed. by Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 99.
[225] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Falsity in their Extramoral Sense', in *Essays on Metaphor*, ed. by Warren Shibles (Whitewater, Wisconsin: The Language Press, 1972), pp. 1-13.
[226] Robert W. Funk, 'The Parables: A Fragmentary Agenda', in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, ed. by Donald G. Miller & Dikran Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), p. 287.
[227] Ibid., p. 288.
[228] Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 3rd edn. (London: SCM, 1972), p. 21.
[229] See Sallie TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables*, especially chapters 3 & 4.

his comic fiction. What I hope to show is just how aware Fielding is of the ambiguous nature of the parabolic form and that it does, indeed, point to a new vision of reality. The activity of metaphor, as I. A. Richards, indicated some time ago, resides more than simply in the fact that, in Dr Johnson's words, 'the particulars of resemblance are so perspicaciously collected.'[230] Metaphor, it is clear, moves beyond mere adornment and, as Richards says, one can discover that dissimilarity is as important to the action of metaphor as similarity.[231] However, in addition to the similitude and dissimilitude which inheres in metaphoric activity, we discover that metaphor actually constructs a new reality. This new reality is, according to Thatcher, precisely what Jesus offers us in his own parabolic teaching:

> Jesus's riddles, parables, and parable-riddles all functioned in a similar way: to confront his audience with something ambiguous or absurd, something that would force them to redefine key terms and realign mental boundaries.[232]

In stripping down Jeremias' 'weapons', Thatcher utilizes a linguistic tool he describes as an 'empty metaphor'. By this he means that, in many of the parables that Jesus offers in the New Testament, a void exists in the traditional semantic triangle of *things*, *words* and *ideas* within which the metaphor or parable is ordinarily intended to operate. For example, he suggests that in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the element or referent to which the parable is intended to point, namely the 'Kingdom of God' is, at the very least, ambiguous. Thus, while Jesus's audience may have understood the tangible element in the parable (what Richards calls the 'vehicle' of the metaphor), in this case the mustard seed itself, the idea to which it points (what Richards calls the 'tenor' of the metaphor) is not only less tangible, it is also unclear as to its precise meaning in any case. Moreover, Thatcher indicates that the growth of the mustard seed in the parable presents both legal and logical problems. Questions arise, firstly, as to whether the mustard seed ought to have been planted at all, as it would appear to violate rabbinic law. Secondly, we are troubled by the growth of the mustard plant – it is clearly not the largest of plants, and as to the cover it provides for birds, this can

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[230] Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets* Vol. 1, ed. by Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 239.

[231] I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 127.

[232] Tom Thatcher, *Jesus the Riddler* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 73.

hardly be assumed to appeal to the very farmers or gardeners to whom the parable would be ostensibly directed. As a result, we become aware that both the 'tenor' of the parable (the meaning of the 'kingdom of God') and the 'vehicle' (the seed and its growth) which illustrates the parable's 'tenor' are somehow misplaced.

Paradoxically, such 'emptying' (or, in my terminology, *misplacement*) must find itself alongside the plenitude that metaphor provides. Insofar as metaphor, as TeSelle makes clear, is not merely confined to the poetic but is inextricably linked with ordinary language, we are provided with a strong hint to the new reality which metaphor brings in its wake.[233] That metaphor is so much a part of the reality of human thought and expression means that it can, indeed, must be a vehicle to point beyond that reality to a new vision, a new experience, a new world. This metaphoric or parabolic connection between these two worlds, of course, reminds us of the same image which Bakhtin provides for us in his assessment of the carnival. It can also helpfully blur the artificial distinction between sacred and secular parables.

In a recent study, Hillis Miller usefully sets up just such a distinction in order to explode it. He argues that, while one can discern that the parables of Jesus can be seen as constative, in that they point to something already existing (the kingdom of God), a secular parable, on the other hand, is truly performative insofar as its use of language actually brings something into existence. As he puts it, 'secular parable is language thrown out that creates a meaning hovering there in thin air, a meaning based only on the language itself and on our confidence in it.'[234] However, this distinction is subsequently nullified by the recognition that both kinds of parable ultimately tend to be about parable. The paradox which infects sacred parable is that it cannot speak about what it purports to speak of. In Scripture it is Jesus, the Word made flesh, who speaks the word of the kingdom. However, the fact that the kingdom of God cannot be spoken of directly, even by the Word itself, begs the question as to how any genuine kingdom communication can be achieved. The same dilemma is to be found at the area of reception. Only those who have 'ears to hear' will understand the parable. But

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[233] Te Selle, *Speaking in Parables*, p. 43.
[234] J. Hillis Miller, 'Parables in the Gospels and in Literature', in *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, ed. by David Jobling, Tina Pippin & Ronald Schleifer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 132-3.

how can this be if the efficacy of the parable as a communicative medium is itself in doubt?

This same conundrum must be faced by secular parable. Even though the parable is not spoken by the Word in this case, but by a human agency which highlights the capacity of language to execute its performative function, we are left with the inescapable conclusion that we cannot actually escape the parabolic into some pure explicative utopia. An example from Kafka serves us well:

> A man once said: […] If you only followed the parables you yourselves
> would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.
> Another said: I bet that is also a parable.
> The first said: You have won.
> The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.
> The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.[235]

The seemingly impenetrable point being made here is that there is, in reality, no escape from the parabolic. One must begin with everyday language in order to follow the parabolic path to 'a better world'. But to state that one has genuinely followed the parable is itself to adopt the very everyday language utilized in the first place. The result is a 'no win' situation. It appears one can merely submit to this as typical Kafkaesque nihilism or, on the contrary, engage with this as a more positive means to blurring the distinction between the secular and the sacred. I would suggest that the latter strategy, more specifically, offers us a way to recognising how fiction can be regarded in legitimately theological terms. For it seems clear that we can discern a fundamental link between the activity of metaphor or parable and that of comedy. Both open up for us a new reality which is fraught with risk. At the same moment, however, we recognise that this is a necessary risk in the sense that our experience of life without metaphor or comedy is diminished or even destroyed.

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[235] Franz Kafka, 'On Parables' in *Parables and Paradoxes* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1970), p. 11.

Let us now apply these broad interpretative principles to Fielding's comic fiction. Can we discover evidence of Fielding's awareness of both the ambiguity endemic in the parabolic and the concomitant openness to a new reality that the parable encourages? To answer this, we must turn immediately to Fielding's 're-visioning' of *The Good Samaritan* as it is found in *Joseph Andrews*.

In Fielding's story, we are presented with, ostensibly, a very similar series of events to that of the original Good Samaritan parable. The eponymous Joseph is set upon by robbers, stripped and left for dead, and is subsequently discovered by a coach party who debate amongst themselves as to the most prudent form of action. Ultimately, Joseph is rescued, taken on board the coach, and is able to continue his journey. This broad outline, itself, however, must not be 'taken on board' as a means to providing us with a definitive reading. Given that, as we have noted, there are obvious parallels with the original Good Samaritan story, to suggest that Fielding is merely re-telling the parable is to remove his story from the metaphorical to the analogical. On this account, Fielding's story merely becomes a simile of the original. This is a natural enough temptation, given the familiarity the reader would have with the Good Samaritan story itself. However, this, it sees to me, is to read Fielding's version as a mere mirroring of the original and thereby a dilution of its own unique parabolic power. Fielding's story itself is a comic parable in its own right and must be read as such in order for us to become aware of the ambivalences which his comic fiction reveals to us. It is, therefore, worth taking a little time to look at this re-visioning more closely.

Jesus provides his listeners with a secure orientation. He begins his story with the words, 'A man was on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho.' This statement by itself would indicate to Jesus's audience the risk that the man was taking, given that this particular road was notorious for 'brigandage from "the Arabian in the wilderness", *i.e.* the Bedouin robbers who infest the unfrequented roads'.[236] Jesus, thereby, sets the scene clearly and concretely. In his tale, the boundaries are familiar,

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[236] Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 5th edn. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1953), p. 286.

the terrain well-known. The hearer is immediately made aware of the direction the tale is heading. This, Fielding does not provide.

Fielding's tale begins in Bk I.xii with the words, 'Nothing remarkable happened on the Road.' This can be taken, of course, at face value as an indication of events thus far on Joseph's journey to meet his beloved Fanny. However, one cannot but wonder at the placement of such a bland statement at the head of a narrative which is about to illustrate the very contrary state of affairs. Here, I would suggest, is Fielding's first foray into the subversion of the traditional Good Samaritan parable, and with parable in general. Fielding is, as is his wont, playing with his readers. The sentence itself disguises and thereby accentuates the ensuing action. One can point to the element of surprise that this particular strategy brings the reader (particularly the eighteenth-century reader). However, one can also point to a deeper reality (a new world, if you like) which this simple sentence provides. That 'nothing happens' is precisely the experience of the novel. Nothing *does* happen in reality. And yet everything happens. The fictive world is, in this sense, deeply metaphorical. The novel becomes, in a sense, an extended parable of human experience. Nothing happens and yet, paradoxically, everything happens. The reader, too, though confronted with unreality is opened to a new reality. We are, then, at the opening of the tale, exposed to Fielding's strategy of re-visioning which moves beyond the merely ethical expectations that the traditional parable provides.

Jesus, in his version of the tale (which Drury has suggested has its own Old Testament antecedents)[237] is content to present the man as a complete and defenceless victim. We are simply told that he fell among robbers who beat him and left him for dead. Fielding, however, in his version of the attack, has Joseph 'who was expert at Cudgel-playing' returning blow for blow with his assailants. There is, it would seem, no room for 'turning the other cheek' in Joseph's theology. There is no doubt, for Fielding, that Joseph is indeed a victim, but he is not a passive one, and, as a result, we are opened to a greater awareness, not only of the ethical implications of self-defence, but the broader issue of the representation of truly fleshly character as a means to move to the

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[237] John Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), pp. 77-8.

new reality that parable can provide. This fleshly nature or HUMAN NATURE, as Fielding would have it, is what colours his entire re-visioning of the parable.

Moving to the next stage of Fielding's re-visioning, we encounter the coach party who, of course, adopt the role of the passers-by in the traditional story. Their first indication of Joseph's plight is introduced by the postillion who tells the coachman, 'he was certain there was a *dead* Man lying in the Ditch, for he heard him groan.' Once again, the status of the victim is enlivened here, one might even say, *resurrected*, through comedy insofar as this humorous act of detection, presents us, paradoxically, with the serious reality of a living human being and not merely a two-dimensional victim. This sense of the physicality of the victim as a means to transport the parable to a new level is seen yet again in the discovery of Joseph's nakedness. This particularly fleshly revelation leads the Lady in the coach to cry out, 'O *J-sus*, a Naked Man!' Fielding's juxtaposition of this epithet with the image of the innocent victim is both humorous and, of course, at the same moment, extremely affecting. We are immediately confronted not only with the amusing (and, one suspects, merely affected) social mores of the lady herself, but with the naked and crucified Christ. By drawing attention to both Joseph's nakedness and the lady's religious outburst (which, unlike the postillion later on in the tale, she is not upbraided for) Fielding fleshes out the new reality to which the parable is intended to point.

The resolution to this part of the story and indeed the heart of the tale is the re-clothing of Joseph. How does it take place? True to the spirit of the original parable, none of those who could easily afford to accommodate Joseph are, for a variety of reasons, inclined to do so. It falls, as in the original story, to the unlikeliest of characters, namely the young postillion, himself, to provide clothing for Joseph. Yet even here, in the fulfilment of the original, Fielding finds room for comic misplacement. The lad hands over his greatcoat 'his only Garment, at the same time swearing a great Oath, (for which he was rebuked by the Passengers)'. The act of Christian charity is allied to an expletive which not only exposes the mixed motivation which lies behind most acts of benevolence but, moreover, emphasises the true sacrificial nature of the act itself. This is made all the more stark when, in an aside, we discover that the boy is later transported to the colonies for robbing a hen-roost. Fielding is, in a comedic mode, asking in this episode not only the most obvious

question regarding charity and love for one's neighbour; he is also asking us the serious question: Is the boy a Bad or Good Samaritan? The question, however, is not asked in such a way as to receive a definitive answer. If anything is revealed at all, it is the ambiguity of human nature itself.

This fleshliness is exacerbated in the coach by the ribaldry of the Lawyer. The less than subtle innuendo transforms the salvific vehicle. We have here, then, not an innocent colt (a prefiguring of the entry into Jerusalem), but a portable bordello. And there appears as little security at the inn. Fielding extends the uncharitable motif into the character of the Surgeon who, upon hearing of Joseph's predicament from the servant-girl, promptly goes back to bed. Things only worsen with the dawn, when, news of their 'guest' reaching her ears, Mrs Tow-wouse, the innkeeper's wife, refuses a shirt to be offered to Joseph and exclaims to her husband:

> 'Common Charity, a F—t!... Common Charity teaches us to provide for ourselves, and our Families; and I and mine won't be ruined by your Charity, I assure you.' 'Well,' says he, 'my Dear, do as you will when you are up, you know I never contradict you.' 'No,' says she, 'if the Devil was to contradict me, I would make the House too hot to hold him.'[238]

Nothing but the insertion of Satan himself could contrast more dramatically and amusingly with the magnanimous 'official' Good Samaritan who offers to provide all that the innkeeper requires and more besides. Fielding, by bringing us into the inn, has misplaced the parable in a bewildering array of economic, theological and, ultimately, sexual vortices.

Indeed, it is the comedy that is played out in this scene which paradoxically opens up to us the transformative nature of the parable itself. Via has suggested that the Good Samaritan be regarded, not as a parable in the strictest sense, but as an example story. While there is obvious merit in this approach ("go and do likewise"), I believe Via, in his analysis, restricts the story to the merely ethical and avoids the broader implications that the form opens us to, not least, as Ricoeur has pointed out, the

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[238] *Joseph Andrews*, I.12.45.

tension that exists between two ways of being.[239] It is precisely this tension which Via seeks to mitigate by means of a dogmatic schema which attempts to define the ultimate purpose of both the parabolic and the comedic. He writes:

> In Jesus's comic parables it is not that a man has within himself the resources for the reassertion of his whole humanity but rather that there comes from beyond himself a new possibility that was not at his disposal. When these parables are seen as defining the divine-human relationship, then it is the grace of God which enables the passage from death to life.[240]

It is this 'defining' of parable which I would argue is comical. That there can be, albeit, in Via's schema, a broad dogmatic and secure claim for the outworking of the parabolic, seems to fly in the face of the recognition that the form remains resolutely resistant to just such visions. One must be prepared to limit oneself to the tension that the form both inhabits and engenders. This tension can only be played out, it seems to me, by means of the comedic. Evidence of such comedic amplification is, of course, found in Jesus's own parables to a degree (for example, The Friend at Midnight or The Unjust Judge). However, in these cases, as in others, what we are asked to do is contrast two broad principles, i.e., the goodness of God as opposed to the evil of humanity. In Fielding, the world is a lot less clear and, as a result, more colourful.

We could, of course, look to other instances of the parabolic that Fielding provides for us, for example his re-working of the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, which plays, strictly speaking, as a straight narrative, nonetheless, when brought into Fielding's hands (as he did with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*), provides metaphoric connections that are ruthlessly and humorously applied. One could, of course, include the entire plot of *Tom Jones* as a re-visioning of the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is enough, however, for our purposes to recognise that Fielding seeks in the parable form not only a means to comically misplace any straight-forward assessment of traditional Christian teaching, but also and more significantly, to illustrate the new world that his comic fiction actually provides for us, It is, I would suggest, all too easy

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[239] Paul Ricoeur, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 4, (1975), 29-148.
[240] Dan Otto Via Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 146.

to describe Fielding as a didactic or moral writer, and to miss, in the ambiguous nature of his comedy, a broader vision of human experience which appears less constrained by tradition or dogma.

Happy Endings?

To this extent, I would argue that Fielding's comic fiction defies the traditional understanding of the happy ending. One can acknowledge that there is, to a degree, a resolution of events, after all, both Joseph and Fanny, and Tom and Sophia (as well as Partridge and Molly Seagrim) are wed in the end. However, as we have witnessed in the re-visioning of the parable of the Good Samaritan, there is evidence that, despite the traditional marital conclusion, throughout Fielding's comic fiction, much is left unresolved. For example, in the conclusion of *Joseph Andrews*, having witnessed the marriage of Joseph and Fanny (with Parson Adams next to drunk) we not only have a brief account of various stock resolutions, but we are immediately taken beyond the novel completely with Fielding's final reference to *High Life*.

This is a barbed comment concerning the now famous furore which surrounded the publication of John Kelly's *Pamela's Conduct in High Life* (1741). The publisher, Richard Chandler, was a friend and colleague of Fielding, and the publication led to much ill-feeling on the part of one Samuel Richardson who sought in his own way to respond to Kelly's work. What Fielding does here is, in a single phrase, move us from the traditional realm of comic resolution, to a contemporary literary battle. There is no happy ending at this point, merely another salvo fired in the direction of Samuel Richardson.

Likewise, in *Tom Jones*, there is one final piece of Fielding's creation which is left unaccounted for, namely Tom's final status. We readily accept and rejoice in the various reconciliations and just recriminations which take place and, of course, in the final matrimonial bliss shared by Tom and his beloved Sophia. But what of Tom, himself? The knowledge of his true parentage (his mother being Bridget Allworthy and the father, a certain Mr Summer, the son of a clergyman of great learning and virtue) though ostensibly bringing Tom truly into the Allworthy familial orbit does

not remove the stigma of illegitimacy. Tom Jones, the foundling, remains as far as the law is concerned 'unfound'. While Ian Watt may criticise Fielding for turning Tom into a gentleman after all, the reality as the novel concludes is that Tom's status is undetermined.

The same argument applies to *Amelia*, the novel which, at a surface level, proffers the most fantastical of happy endings (Battestin describes it as a 'comic apocalypse'),[241] with the Booths miraculously finding themselves in receipt of Amelia's mother's estate. However, if we examine the 'conversion' of Booth which precedes this providential windfall, there is little in the way of evidence that he has in reality changed at all. Once more in the debtor's cell, we hear Booth confess:

> 'Since I have been in this wretched place I have employed my time almost entirely in reading over a series of sermons which are contained in that book (meaning Dr Barrow's works, which then lay on the table before him) in proof of the Christian religion; and so good an effect have they had upon me, that I shall, I believe, be the better man for them as long as I live. I have not a doubt (for I own I have had such) which remains now unsatisfied. If ever an angel might be thought to guide the pen of a writer, surely the pen of that great and good man had such an assistant.' The doctor readily concurred in the praises of Dr Barrow, and added, 'You say you have had your doubts, young gentleman; indeed, I did not know that-- and, pray, what were your doubts?' 'Whatever they were, sir,' said Booth, "they are now satisfied, as I believe those of every impartial and sensible reader will be if he will, with due attention, read over these excellent sermons.' 'Very well,' answered the doctor, 'though I have conversed, I find, with a false brother hitherto, I am glad you are reconciled to truth at last, and I hope your future faith will have some influence on your future life.' 'I need not tell you, sir,' replied Booth, 'that will always be the case where faith is sincere, as I assure you mine is. Indeed, I never was a rash disbeliever…'[242]

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[241] 'The Problem of *Amelia*: Hume, Barrow, and the Conversion of Captain Booth', *ELH* 41 (1974), 613-648 (p. 614).
[242] *Amelia*, XII.5.521-522.

This conversation seems to revolve around doubt, but the nature of the doubt is never frankly expressed, and the fact that the doubt existed at all is a veritable revelation to the otherwise omniscient Dr. Harrison. As a result, we are left questioning the difference between the Booth prior to this 'conversion' and the Booth we encounter after the blessed event. Scholars such as Battestin and Campbell, though recognising the unresolved tenor of the sequence, nonetheless argue that Booth's conversion has either philosophical or social implications.[243] However, I am persuaded that the diverse results which accrue from this searching for a post-conversion scenario, merely serve to illustrate for us the equivocal nature of Booth's religious turn. It remains difficult to critically converse with this conversion. As Palmer comments, 'We assume, of course, that as a result of this conversion a new Booth will emerge, but we never see the actual emergence.'[244] So, even in the most obvious (some would say artless) of happy endings, there remain loose ends - ends that are, as it were, misplaced.

Indeed, as I have indicated already, it is in the very nature of the comedic, bound as it is to the metaphoric, to leave us with such ambiguity. In this respect, Karl Barth was correct when he said that 'humour, like art is not a standpoint'.[245] It is in the nature of the comedic to lead us to areas of uncertainty and even doubt, not, as some would have it, in order to finally reveal that there is a final consummation, but to simply revel in the journey itself. Fielding's approach appears to chime with that of Emily Dickinson writing more than one hundred years later:

<blockquote>
Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
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[243] See Battestin, 'The Problem of Amelia' and Jill Campbell, *Natural Masques: Gender and Identity in Fielding's Plays and Novels*, pp. 228-229.

[244] Palmer, Eustace, '*Amelia* – The Decline of Fielding's Art', *Essays in Criticism* 21 (1971), 135-151. (p. 137). An alternative, and more forgiving view of Booth's conversion, is that of Samuel E. Longmire, 'Booth's Conversion in *Amelia*', *South Atlantic Bulletin* Vol. 40, no. 4 (Nov. 1975), 12-17. I would argue, however, that Longmire fails to address the very ambiguity surrounding the conversion that I am suggesting.

[245] Karl Barth, *Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1981), p. 512.

As Lightning to the Children eased

With explanations kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind.[246]

Dickinson is wrestling here, as she does in many of her works, with the ambiguities faced by those who would seek after the truth, particularly in the face of tragedy. Her resolution is to come at truth from an angle, to sneak up on it, as it were, as though it were a wild beast. The ambiguity thus extends not only to the approach to truth, but, in the end, to the very definition of truth itself. Truth becomes, then, not a placid, or passive entity waiting to be discovered, but a wild, restless and ultimately unsettling safari, which has no guarantee of success. As Wolosky puts it in a separate context, 'The disjunction of earth from heaven, of language from the Word, constitutes for Dickinson the problem, not the solution.'[247]

Fielding, in his comedy, similarly offers us no guarantees. Mark Spilka, in his study of comic resolution in *Joseph Andrews*, sees in the character of Adams a kind of comic blessing on the vicissitudes of human frailty. His jumping from bed to bed sanctifies the whole messy project of human existence.[248] There is, indeed, truth to be found, but not necessarily in the most obvious places and the truth when discovered, like Parson Adams in bed with Fanny, may not be the most easy to digest.

The whole joyous mess is summed up well, I believe, by Oscar Wilde, who more succinctly and theologically stated it: 'God and other artists are always a little obscure.'[249]

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[246] Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975), pp. 506-7.

[247] Shira Wolosky, *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 158.

[248] Mark Spilka, 'Comic Resolution in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*', *College English*, 15 (1953), 11-19.

[249] Quoted in *Quotes and Anecdotes for Preachers and Teachers*, ed. by Anthony P. Castle (Leigh-on-Sea, Essex: Kevin Mayhew Ltd., 1979), p. 251.

<u>Chapter Three</u>

The Word Made Strange: Fielding, the Novel and the Misplacement of Meaning

> The theological significance of literature…lies in its being the explicit *mise-en-scène* of human beings' indefatigable, always fallible but nevertheless meaningful attempts to come to terms with [the] difference between words and meaning we hope and believe that they express and designate beyond their linguistic condition.[250]

> All novelists know their art proceeds by indirection. When tempted by didacticism, the writer should imagine a spruce sea-captain eyeing the storm ahead, bustling from instrument to instrument in a catherine wheel of gold braid, expelling crisp orders down the speaking tube. But there is nobody below decks; the engine room was never installed, and the rudder broke off centuries ago. The captain may put on a very good act, convincing not just himself but even some of the passengers; though whether their floating world will come through depends not on him but on the mad winds and sullen tides, the icebergs and the sudden crusts of reef.[251]

Fielding's Knowing Ignorance

It is generally accepted that the epistemological 'Copernican revolution' provided by Kant fatally questioned the empirical system which emphasised the passive nature of the human subject in the face of objective phenomena. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* we read:

> We have intended, then, to say, that all our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearances; that the things which we intuit are not in themselves the same as our representations of them in intuition, nor are

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[250] Erik Borgman, Bart Philipen and Lea Verstricht, eds., *Literary Canons and Religious Identity* (London: Ashgate, 2004), p. 6.
[251] Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, p. 227.

their relations in themselves so constituted as they appear to us; and that if we take away the subject, or even only the subjective constitution of our senses in general, then not only the nature and relations of objects in space and time, but even space and time themselves disappear; and that these, as appearances, cannot exist in themselves, but only in us.[252]

Thus, according to Kant, we 'make up' our world. It becomes *our* grand creation. More specifically, in the aesthetic sphere, Kant 'offered a novel philosophy of art grounded in the notion that aesthetic works were integral phenomena whose finality was exhausted in the individual's experience of the work'.[253] This 'making up our world' extends, then, to the worlds we make up. On the basis of this, it may then come as less of a surprise to learn that, according to Kuehn, the novels of Fielding were for Kant 'the works from which he learned the most'.[254] The ramifications of such a radical epistemological shift are clear to those who recognise, as Unsworth has, the ease by which our knowledge can be mis-created, mis-managed or mis-read. On the strength of this, can it be argued that Fielding's novels - his 'new province of writing' - prefigured Kant's epistemological revolution in the sense that its self conscious style testified to the slippage that takes place in our knowledge at every level, and that such slippage, in Fielding's hands, is not always entirely innocent?

To offer an introductory example, Fielding makes clear his own ignorance of sorts when, in the previously cited passage where the novel is revealed as a 'great creation' he states:

> READER, it is impossible we should know what sort of person thou wilt be; for, perhaps, thou may'st be as learned in human nature as Shakespeare himself was, and, perhaps, thou may'st be no wiser than some of his editors. Now, lest this latter should be the case, we think proper, before we go any farther together, to give thee a few wholesome admonitions; that

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[252] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. by Vasilis Politis (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), p. 61.

[253] Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', in *Modern Literary Theory*, ed. by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold Publishers, 1998), p. 253.

[254] Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 130. Kant, incidentally, shared the same birthday as Fielding.

> thou may'st not as grossly misunderstand and misrepresent us, as some of
>
> the said editors have misunderstood and misrepresented their author.[255]

The intricate texture of this one cheeky paragraph is typical of the narrator's intrusion into the text of *Tom Jones*. Yet it is not enough to describe this as simple irony, or indeed, as A.R. Humphreys puts it, the kind of irony that 'represents the social stability of its age'.[256] In this last comment we are confronted once again with the temptation to bind Fielding's technique to an exclusively contemporary context. In the passage, Fielding betrays the fact that he is more than aware of the epistemological tensions that result from producing a text. One can argue that this is due to his theatrical training, and his awareness of an 'audience' for his work. But, once more, this merely confines us to the kind of synchronic criticism which I believe to be insufficient in any current exploration of Fielding's works. It is necessary for us to go to the text itself, rather than soliciting any psycho-sociological explanation of the means by which Fielding presents his knowledge.

There are several incidences of ignorance being displayed in this passage. Each incidence of ignorance however, is counterpointed by a corresponding awareness and, as a result, slippage of any prescribed understanding of ignorance takes place. Regarding this passage, the first such incidence is Fielding's immediate and obvious ignorance of the nature of his reader. This apparently humble admission, in fact, belies a shrewd understanding of the nature of the reader, as is evinced by his placing this particular statement of ignorance in the context of a high literary comparison. Fielding knows that, at the least, his readers have some awareness of the bard. This awareness leads to the second layer of counterpointed ignorance. Fielding's placement of his reader within the context of a literary comparison, where ignorance forms the key constituent, is *prima facie* suggestive of an undeveloped sense of, not only the literary capabilities of the reader, but also of a similar ignorance of the reader's own moral self-awareness: 'perhaps, thou may'st be no wiser'. Fielding, however, knows only too well the human capacity to seek to be on the side of the angels, and we can thus be sure that, regardless of any empirical suggestion, he is perfectly able to place

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[255] *Tom Jones*, X.i.337.

[256] A.R. Humphreys, 'Fielding's Irony: Its Method and Effects', in *Fielding: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 16.

his readers' moral capabilities in a particular light. The obvious shorthand for all of this, of course, is flattery. But, as a textual performance, flattery is too small a term. For flattery is merely a device to mollify a potential source of social tension. Here, however, Fielding is able to both flatter and insult.

Fielding is thus exploding the notion of ignorance. His conflation of ignorance with knowledge by means of subtle literary placement subverts the traditional empirically based epistemological framework. Knowledge and ignorance serve not simply to define the individual at any one time but, in fact, constitute the frail and fluid position which each of us inhabits from moment to moment. The true irony in all of this is that the traditional synchronic approach to Fielding's work as evinced by Watt and others stresses the orderly, systematic nature of Fielding's work. In reality, we see that the text itself provides evidence of a subverting epistemological strategy. Fielding's grand focus being human nature itself, it is inevitable that this subversion infiltrates numerous areas of human experience.

We shall, later in this study, specifically examine the means by which revelation is understood and exercised in Fielding, but at this point we will briefly assess how Fielding's misplaced knowledge is extended more generally to the knowledge of God. A useful example which indicates Fielding's ambivalent attitude is to be found in *Joseph Andrews*. Having been astounded by two lawyers who have sought, by turns, to disparage and then extol the character of a member of the local gentry, Parson Adams discovers in conversation with the host of the inn that both have been lying all along, and that the character of the individual in question is neither completely black nor snow white. Adams is keen to understand such behaviour and is given a lesson in lying by the host.

> "Why, prithee, Friend," cries the Host, "dost thou pretend never to have told a lye in thy Life?" - "Never a malicious one, I am certain," answered Adams, "nor with a Design to injure the Reputation of any Man living." - "Pugh! malicious; no, no," replied the Host; "not malicious with a Design to hang a Man, or bring him into Trouble; but surely, out of love to oneself, one must speak better of a Friend than an Enemy." - "Out of love to yourself, you should confine yourself to Truth," says Adams, "for by

doing otherwise you injure the noblest Part of yourself, your immortal Soul. I can hardly believe any Man such an Idiot to risque the Loss of that by any trifling Gain, and the greatest Gain in this World is but Dirt in comparison of what shall be revealed hereafter." Upon which the Host, taking up the Cup, with a Smile, drank a Health to hereafter; adding, "He was for something present." - "Why," says Adams very gravely, "do not you believe another World?" To which the host answered, "Yes; he was no Atheist." - "And you believe you have an immortal Soul?" cries Adams. He answered, "God forbid he should not." - "And Heaven and Hell?" said the Parson. The Host then bid him "not to profane; for those were Things not to be mentioned nor thought of but in Church." Adams asked him, "Why he went to Church, if what he learned there had no Influence on his Conduct in Life?" "I go to Church," answered the Host, "to say my Prayers and behave godly." - "And dost not thou," cried Adams, "believe what thou hearest at Church?" - "Most part of it, Master," returned the Host. "And dost not thou then tremble," cries Adams, "at the Thought of eternal Punishment?" - "As for that, Master," said he, "I never once thought about it; but what signifies talking about matters so far off? The Mug is out, shall I draw another?"[257]

The key point to notice in the above exchange is that knowledge of God is bound up with knowledge of man. Adams is seen as the inferior partner in the debate, even though he appears to possess the theological or moral high ground. Adams is the inquisitor but it is the host of the inn who is described as 'shrewd' and is able to more than hold his own in the theological debate. Indeed, one can detect the spirit of the freethinker in the innkeeper insofar as he is prepared to acknowledge that he does not accept all that the church teaches. Knowledge of God is thus subverted at both the epistemological and institutional level. But Fielding goes further in his subtly ambivalent strategy. He does not provide us with a victor in this particular theological spat. Rather, we discover that the common ground between the two is not to be found in the thirst for any rarefied debate regarding the nature of doctrine or the hereafter, but in a much more visceral thirst – for the innkeeper's ale. Fielding, then, is not

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[257] *Joseph Andrews*, II.3.78.

suggesting that knowledge of God is unachievable, but that it is more likely to be found in the active sharing of the common cup – participation in a comic Eucharist. Knowledge of God, here, becomes less the philosophical conundrum which exercises characters such as Thwackum and Square in *Tom Jones* and, to a lesser extent, Adams, himself in *Joseph Andrews*, than it is a mystery to be grounded in human experience.

Fielding's Subversive Creation

Sheridan Baker has described *Joseph Andrews* as 'not only the first English comic novel, but the Declaration of Independence for all fiction'.[258] It would be fair to say that this independence goes deeper than Baker appears to suggest. He is, of course, right to draw our attention to Fielding's work as a launching point for an art form which was to supersede (for better or worse) the dramatic and poetic forms which had hitherto been dominant. However, we can detect that this spirit of liberty goes further than any straight-forward freeing-up of technique. Fielding's 'new province of writing' was a creation which questioned itself. The emergence of the novel form, in Fielding's hands, leads to an inevitable reflection upon emergence itself.

As a way in to this reflection upon emergence, it may be useful to posit a literary comparison – one which at first sight may appear more than a little incongruous. The post-modern work which both glories in and rails against those dissonances and tragedies which constitute the human experience expressed by Fielding, is Kurt Vonnegut's anti-war novel, *Slaughterhouse 5*. In this novel of sentimental emptiness we hear again and again the neo-Ecclesiastian lamentation 'So it goes' – used at every reference to death in the work. Almost incidentally to the incanting of this endless, mournful mantra, we encounter the time-travelling and world/war-weary Billy Pilgrim, who meets with the mysterious alien race, the Tralfamadorians. During one such encounter we read:

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[258] Sheridan Baker, 'Fielding: The Comic Reality of Fiction', in *The Eighteenth Century English Novel*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), p. 143.

Billy couldn't read Tralfamadorian, of course, but he could at least see how the books were laid out – in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars. Billy commented that the clumps might be telegrams.

'Exactly,' said the voice.

'They *are* telegrams?'

'There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you're right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message – describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after another. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvellous moments seen all at one time.'[259]

What the Tralfamadorians speak of as their literature comes across to Billy (and to us) as a higher technological artefact. At the same time, however, we are here presented with an image of the deconstructed text. As Fiedler puts it, Tralfamadore, representing 'absolute Elsewhere, is more easily reached by art of madness than by mere technology'.[260] *This* text does not belong to some far flung imagined future. It belongs here and now. It is a text which defies the constraints of time and which, at this moment, intimates and animates the beautiful, surprising and deep. Billy's time-travelling journey, then, is revealed to be, at the same time, a journey in and through, behind, beyond and before the text. His (and ours) is revealed to be a timeless, deferred experience. The emergence of this Tralfamadorian text at a single point in his experience paradoxically opens Billy up to the exploded experience of creation – a creation not bound in temporal or spatial terms. Up to this moment it appears that Billy has been at the mercy of time - his journey has not been a pleasant one. His encounter with the Tralfamadorians and their ever-open texts, however, reorientates Billy, who, though suspected by his daughter of being insane, finds for himself a longed-for peace. Thus, it is the recognition of this creative openness which redeems,

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[259] Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 5* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 64.
[260] Leslie Fiedler, 'The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut: Portrait of the Novelist as Bridge over Troubled Water', in *Kurt Vonnegut: Images and Representations*, ed. by Marc Leeds (Westport Ct.: Greenwood Press, 2000), p. 13.

for Vonnegut, the apparently interminable cycle 'so it goes' and frees us to experience that same dangerous, open-ended world in a reinvigorated and hopeful manner. The Tralfamadorian text becomes both the focus and the means of redemption. To experience the text is to experience freedom.

It is instructive to place alongside the passage from Vonnegut a portion from another travel narrative with apparently supra-rational overtones - Henry Fielding's *A Journey From This World To The Next* (1743):

> Whether the ensuing pages were really the Dream or Vision of some very pious and holy Person; or whether they were really written in the other World and sent back to this, which is the Opinion of many, (tho' I think, too much inclining to Superstition;) or lastly, whether, as infinitely the greatest Part imagine, they were really the Production of some choice Inhabitant of *New Bethlehem* is not necessary nor easy to determine. It will be abundantly sufficient, if I give the Reader an Account by what means they came into my possession.[261]

In this passage we are faced once more with the motif of creation or emergence. More specifically, what is at issue is the authority which lies *behind* the emergence of this particular text. Fielding provides us with no definitive answer to this question. In so doing he exposes the vulnerability of the text. The text, we are informed, was at first (like the Tralfamadorian text) virtually illegible, leading many and various authorities to label it either 'atheistical' or a 'Libel on the Government'. The content of the text, when deciphered, appears not to impress the Royal Society. That body of august rationality deem it not 'wonderful enough for them'.

At every turn, then, the ecclesiastical, civil and scientific communities are seen to condemn and reject this text. And yet, here it is before us. A point of tension now exists in that we are invited to witness an artefact which, like that of the

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[261] Henry Fielding, *A Journey from this World to the Next* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

Tralfamadorians, must be taken on trust as the record of experience beyond our own.[262]

In Fielding's hands the text has, at the point of emergence, been exposed as a vehicle of subversion. Its genesis refuses to be confined by any rational or, more specifically, religio-political schema. The text lies open before us and the measure of its authority is governed by an equal measure of trust. Such a measure of trust forms the counterpoint to the stark issue that at every moment there remains the distinct possibility that its creation is that of a madman from *New Bethlehem*. Bedlam is placed in opposition to *New Jerusalem*. In other words, hell is juxtaposed with an image of glory.

Life and death are then at the heart of this text in a way that goes behind the immediate titular façade. The journey we are asked to undertake begins before we reach chapter one. Indeed, it begins prior to us picking up the text, for we are already experiencing our lives as caught between heaven and hell, the eternal and the infernal, the magnificent and the mundane – in other words, that very dissonance that Tobin has informed us is craved by the post-modern mind. Fielding, in his presentation of emergence, merely opens our epistemological boundaries to the multifarious possibilities that we are afforded at each moment.

It is just such emergence that Derrida describes as 'untamed genesis'.[263] By this, he refers to that infinite openness of the text which defies complete prescription. It seems apparent then, that the postmodern *Slaughterhouse 5* and Fielding's *Journey From This World To The Next* share this same openness. Moreover, it can be suggested that Vonnegut's Tralfamadore and Fielding's representation of the afterlife share both a disturbing and comic sensibility. Their worlds are ludicrously and dangerously fluid. Billy Pilgrim's journey to, and experience of, Tralfamadore is suspended between madness and technology, while the author in Fielding's *Journey* finds the path to glory interrupted by monstrosity, cant and humanity. There are no defined worlds

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[262] A similar postmodern strategy is to be found in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, where we read of the mysterious, tangled history of Adso's manuscript, and find the narrator appearing equally anxious over his presentation: 'In short, I am full of doubts. I really don't know why I have decided to pluck up my courage and present, as if it were authentic, the manuscript of Adso of Melk.' Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 5.
[263] Jacques Derrida, 'Genesis and Structure', p. 196.

here. We are left uneasy as to the nature of ultimate destiny. Tralfamadore and Elysium are unattainable destinations in that their existence reflects upon the incompleteness of every journey.

Fielding further plays with this concept of infinite openness when, in his 'defence' of his use of metempsychosis found in *A Journey From This World To The Next*, he disingenuously remarks:

> It would be paying a very mean Compliment to the human Understanding, to suppose I am under any Necessity of vindicating myself from designing, in an Allegory of this Kind, to oppose any present System, or to erect a new one of my own: but perhaps the Fault may lie rather in the Heart than in the Head; and I may be misrepresented, without being misunderstood.[264]

Goldgar, referring to this 'defence', believes that Fielding in *The Journey* is merely adopting 'a satiric device (metempsychosis) which enables him to display the same ambition and craving for "greatness" operating in a wide range of individual types, in a wide variety of social circumstances, and over a long period of human history'.[265] Fielding's 'design' is thus, for Goldgar, the extended exposure of vain glory.[266] Though in broad sympathy with this interpretation, I believe there is more in Fielding's defence than immediately meets the eye. For me, the key phrase is 'to oppose any present System, or to erect a new one of my own'.

Fielding juxtaposes the temporally open 'present' with the ideologically fixed 'System', and goes on to suggest the possibility of such a fixed system being replaced. Though this phrase is played out in the context of a vigorous denial, one can suggest that the author, here, is protesting too much. The comedic aspect of this denial points to the perennial threat of system renewal or replacement. Emergence, in this respect, is revealed as an ongoing and deferred process.

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[264] Henry Fielding, *Miscellanies* Vol. I, p. 4.
[265] Bertrand A. Goldgar, 'Myth and History in Fielding's *Journey From This World To The Next*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, no.3 (1986), pp. 235-252 (p. 240).
[266] This, of course, forms the main thrust of Fielding's satirical *Jonathan Wild*, which serves as an extended ironic treatment of 'greatness'.

Such open-ended suspension is beautifully illustrated at the level of the text itself in *A Journey from This World to the Next* where, on arriving at Elysium, the author encounters Shakespeare attempting to resolve a textual dispute between two notable tragedians of the period, Betterton and Booth:

I then observed *Shakespeare* standing between *Betterton* and *Booth*, and deciding a Difference between those two great Actors concerning the placing an accent in one of his lines: this was disputed on both sides with a Warmth which surprised me in *Elysium*, till I discovered by Intuition that every Soul retained its principal Characteristic, being, indeed, its very Essence. The line was that celebrated one in *Othello;*
> *Put out the Light, and then put out the Light,*
according to *Betterton*. Mr. *Booth* contended to have it thus;
> *Put out the Light, and then put out* the *Light*.
I could not help offering my Conjecture on this Occasion, and suggested it might perhaps be,
> *Put out the light, and then put out* thy *Light*.
Another hinted a Reading very *sophisticated* in my Opinion,
> *Put out the light, and then put out* thee*, Light,*
making Light to be the vocative Case. Another would have altered the last Word, and read,
> *Put out thy Light, and then put out thy* Sight.
But *Betterton* said, if the text was to be *disturbed*, he saw no reason why a Word might not be changed as well as a Letter, and, instead of *put out thy* Light, you might read *put out thy* Eyes. At last it was agreed on all sides, to refer the matter to the Decision of Shakespeare himself, who delivered his Sentiments as follows: 'Faith, Gentlemen, it is so long since I wrote the Line, I have forgot my Meaning. This I know, could I have dreamed so much Nonsense would have been talked and writ about it, I would have blotted it out of my Works; for I am sure, if any of these be my Meaning, it doth me very little Honour.'[267]

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[267] *A Journey From This World To The Next*, p. 35. See also Fielding's mocking of the Shakespeare 'critic' in *The Covent Garden Journal* No.31 (April 1752), ed. by Bertrand A. Goldgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 192-196.

The crucial backcloth to this pedantic textual discussion is the contentious spirit in which it is carried out. Elysium, it seems, cannot remove or even restrain certain essential human characteristics. We carry with us our foibles. Instability is therefore comically introduced into a place of seeming tranquillity. And, it is in this world of stability and security invaded by instability, that we discover that meaning in our world is also clearly vulnerable. Shakespeare, it transpires, cannot remember his meaning, and though he cannot tell his disputants what the true meaning is, he clearly knows what it is *not*. The consequences of this comical disputation are clear - if Shakespeare's meaning is lost in a place of paradise, then it is not going to be ultimately determined this side of glory. Indeed, as we have noted, for Fielding, Elysium itself is no secure destination and this factor alone magnifies the indeterminate nature of the text.

Both Fielding and Vonnegut thus effectively unravel the worlds they create. Blanchot, in his criticism of the prevailing desire to use the word 'world' to describe the essential nature of the novel states that:

> If every novel has a horizon of being that expresses it, this does not mean that the novel must always take place in the world we know or in a world like it, nor that it depends on the circumstances of 'life', nor that it must feature characters whose simulated existence can be identified with that of the reader.[268]

Blanchot's point may, at first glance, appear more than a little obvious. After all, there works of fiction which place their characters in fantastic, other-worldly places, like Tralfamadore or Elysium. But Blanchot's comment runs deeper than this. His implication is that there are no 'worlds' to be discovered, mapped out and delineated except in the unworldly terrain known as the novel. Tralfamadore and Elysium are, in this respect, undiscoverable, uncharted and non-linear. The novel, as an anchor-point of unfixability is a fleeting embodiment of Derrida's maxim, *Il, n'y a pas de hors-*

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[268] Maurice Blanchot, 'The Pure Novel', in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. by Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 41.

texte.[269] This is confirmed by the simultaneous recognition that there is everything and nothing *inside* the text.

All of this, according to Blanchot, is evidence of the novel as a work of bad faith. By this, Blanchot means to point to the inherent instability of the creative process. It is the novelist,

> Who believes in his characters and yet sees himself behind them, who is ignorant of them, who gives them a reality in which they remain unknown and finds in the words of which he is master a means of having them at his disposal without ceasing to believe that they escape him.[270]

To create a world is inevitably to enter the psychological space of the Creator. Fielding understands this all too clearly and, indeed, takes advantage of it. His is the most artful of creations. He gives the impression of knowing precisely what he is doing and he wishes us to be just as aware of his grand design. But this 'I know that you know that I know' attitude regarding the creation of his fiction, paradoxically, reflects an ambiguity Fielding had over the work of the divine in his creation. His early detractors, while determining his fiction to be lacking in moral fibre and less palatable than say, Richardson's more overtly moral epistolary offerings, were less aware of a potentially more damning charge – Fielding's mockery of the creative act. Fielding entitled one of his plays, *The Mock Doctor* (1733). He may well have described himself as the Mock Creator. He sets himself up as the ruler of his own universe. The lives of all his creatures are at his mercy, or as he was fond of putting it, 'providence'. His are the providential hands that guide the creation toward its consummation. And literal consummations lie at the end of his two greatest novels, *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* – a reflection of God's primary command to the first Adam, 'Go forth and multiply.'

Yet, for all his craftsmanship, all his plotting, his creation is a potential blasphemy, for, despite his posturing, he does not ultimately know, as the true Creator does, the

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[269] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976), p. 158.

[270] Maurice Blanchot, 'The Novel is a Work of Bad Faith', in *The Blanchot Reader*, p. 71.

end from the beginning. The creator of a work of art, no matter how calculating, will always, and at every point, have a scintilla of doubt as to the destiny of his creation. In the theological climate of the early eighteenth century, the understanding of God's involvement with his created order was of increasing importance. The so-called deistic controversies, coupled with the rising awareness of man's own ability to have some greater measure of control over his own universe, led to an inevitable questioning as to the nature and extent of God's providential oversight of his creation. We shall return to the specific issues of blasphemy and providence in later chapters.[271] At this point however, let us examine more closely the relationship between Fielding's fiction and Scripture.

Fielding, the word and the Word

In her paper, 'The Secularization of Language in the Seventeenth Century', Margreta de Grazia argues that, in the period in question, one can trace a gradual development of the mistrust of ordinary language. Though fundamental for the emergence and subsequent application of philosophical programmes, language held within it the seeds of obfuscation and indeed blatant trickery.[272] The grand empiricist, John Locke championed the cause of language as a means to communicate 'determined and uniform ideas',[273] but already recognised that such a task was all but impossible. This revelation did not hinder his complaint:

> For he that shall well consider the errors and obscurity, the mistakes and confusion, that are spread in the world by an ill use of words, will find some reason to doubt whether language, as it has been employed, has contributed more to the improvement or hindrance of knowledge amongst mankind.[274]

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[271] See Chapters 4 & 5.

[272] For example, Hobbes points to four potential abuses of speech: inconstancy of signification i.e. mistakes; the use of metaphor to 'deceive'; lying; and 'grieving with the tongue', i.e. verbal abuse (which, unsurprisingly, is deemed improper 'unlesse it be one whom wee are obliged to govern'. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 25-26.

[273] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1997), III.xi.453.

[274] Ibid.

Locke's pessimism is made all the more significant when one considers the connection that had hitherto existed between human and divine language. It is this connection, exemplified in the three-fold order of the Book of the World (or Nature), the Book of Scripture and the divine imprint on every individual, which is necessarily put in question by the increasing attraction of mathematical rather than literary formulae. As Locke himself puts it, 'the study of mathematics has opened and disentangled [their minds] from the cheat of words.'[275]

Consequently, the place of Scripture as the divine Word was consistently examined and re-examined. Milton in his essay, *Christian Doctrine* (*circa* 1660), finds himself struggling to explain how the text of Scripture and the reader can interact:

> We have particularly under the gospel, a double scripture. There is the external scripture of the written word and the internal scripture of the Holy Spirit which he, according to God's promise, has engraved upon the hearts of believers, and which is certainly not to be neglected.[276]

Lori Branch, in her recent study, *Rituals of Spontaneity*, has enhanced our awareness of this emphasis upon the importance of individual interpretation, to suggest that the turn inwards toward free spiritual expression was, itself, a crucial example of the rising anxiety over the place of the word. The paradox of this rejection of liturgical or outward form, she suggests, is that, in order to preserve the freedom of expression, other rubrics such as the Puritan *Directory for the Publique Worship of God* (1644) had to be incorporated. The fear of impropriety in ordinary language was so great, then, that free prayer could, in reality never be truly free.

This linguistic paradox is a powerful symptom of that growing anxiety which was to later infuse what Barth described as 'the century of mystery', viz. the eighteenth century. Barth, himself, has indicated that what he calls 'the absolute man' of the Enlightenment period could not but find himself in an epistemological quandary. For example, one can trace, at the rise of the empirical sciences, an unsettling resemblance

[275] 'Letter to William Molyneux, 26th Dec. 1692', in *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. by E.S. De Beer (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 609.

[276] John Milton, *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton* Vol. VI, ed. by Maurice Kelley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 587.

between the secular search for certainty and the Puritan quest 'for grounding religious knowledge in a literalist reading of Scripture focused ever more intensely on manifest, genuine *experience*'.[277] Barth broadens this sense of unease to provide a critique of the entire systematizing thesis:

> Where there is a programme, there is also a problem. And where there is a problem we find ourselves recalled, in one way or another, to a reality beyond the scope of programmes. A problem means limits and contradiction, perhaps self-contradiction.[278]

Such apparent self-contradiction holds within it immediate theological implications. It suggests that a critical breach has occurred in what had once appeared an impregnable fortress, namely the working out in language of the intimate connection between God and man. The image of God is substantially defined by his use of words. Adam's naming of the creatures of the world not only demonstrates his, albeit limited, lordship over the created order, it also, more fundamentally, points to his ontological oneness with the supreme creator. Language, then, provides the stable bond which glues earth to heaven. Indeed, the attempt to discover or, rather, rediscover this special, originating language, has a whole history of its own, and had a serious purpose, as James Bono points out:

> If one could identify the Adamic language, one could begin to recover Adam's lost wisdom and harmony with nature by attempting to revive his understanding between words and things.[279]

However, as Bono argues, this search though diligently carried out, was ultimately doomed to failure. This search for Paradise had, by the rise of the novel form in the early eighteenth century, experienced something of a Fall.

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[277] Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), p. 42.
[278] Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Brian Cozens and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 23.
[279] James J. Bono, *The Word of God and the Languages of Man* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p. 75.

Such a crisis had, of course, a particular theological expression in the Reformation. This specific theological upheaval, if nothing else, initiated an unsettling awareness of the inevitable circularity of establishing an unchallenged criterion upon which true knowledge could be established.[280] Despite the scale of the rupture, however, like the persuasion of the serpent in the garden, the threat to epistemological security was, in large measure, insidious. In the heat of controversy no-one was prepared to cede any ground. Nonetheless, by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a growing unease with man's place in the cosmos can discerned. A good example is to be found in the work of the, admittedly, somewhat eccentric cleric, Joseph Glanvill, who finds himself perplexed by the difficulties of coming to terms with an ever expanding body of knowledge:

> For all things are a *great Darkness* to us, and we are *so* to ourselves: The *plainest* things are as *obscure*, as the most *confessedly mysterious*; and the *Plants* we tread on are as much *above* us, as the *Stars* and *Heavens:* The things that *touch* us, are as *distant* from us as the *Poles*, and we are as much *Strangers* to *our selves*, as to the People of the *Indies*.[281]

Attempts to obviate this unease included, of course, the bolstering of the authority of Scripture itself. If our relationship between ourselves and the divine is dictated by words then surely the reinforcement of the status of Scripture can reassure us of our true place once again. The reformers certainly thought that this strategy would succeed and even believed that Scripture could be used as a scientific tool itself to cast light on the world:

> For just as eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness or by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so is our

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[280] See Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1979), esp. ch. 1.

[281] Joseph Glanvill, Essay I : '*Against* Confidence *in* Philosophy *And Matters of* Speculation' in his *Essays on several important subjects in philosophy and religion* (London: 1676), p. 32. Similar sentiments are to be found in John Donne's *Anniversaries*, esp. *Second Anniversary* II. 259-89. John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by A. J. Smith (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 294.

feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeking God, we are immediately confused.[282]

But, by the seventeenth century, such straight-forward confidence appears to have waned somewhat. The threefold order of Nature, Scripture, and the divine imprint had altered. By this time, in the words of De Grazia:

> The Book of Nature is mathematical; the imprint within is trans-verbal or intuitive; and while the Bible cannot but be in words, its message must be supplemented and modified by more authoritative readings. The new form of the texts comes to determine their relative worth; *the more abstracted from ordinary language, the more reliable the text*. (italics mine)[283]

It is this latter emphasis upon abstraction which leads, for example, to the work of George Herbert (1593-1633) and the other metaphysical poets in their attempts to recover some kind of linguistic connection between the human and the divine. Herbert, particularly, was aware, as John Tobin puts it, of being 'in the middle of a paradoxical universe'.[284] It was this awareness which led him to use wordplay 'in order to ring the changes on the basic score of the Christian story'.[285] A prime example is found in his poem, *The Son*:

> Let foreign nations of their language boast,
> What fine variety each tongue affords:
> I like our language, as our men and coast:
> Who cannot dress it well, want wit, not words.
> How neatly do we give one only name
> To parents' issue and the sun's bright star!
> A son is light and fruit; a fruitful flame
> Chasing the father's dimness, carried far
> From the first man in th' East, to fresh and new

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[282] John Calvin, *Institutes* I.xiv.160-161, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).
[283] Margreta De Grazia, 'The Secularization of Language in the Seventeenth Century', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr-Jun., 1980), 319-329 (p. 324).
[284] George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by John Tobin (London: Penguin, 2004), p. xv.
[285] Ibid., p. xv.

> Western discov'ries of posterity.
>
> So in one word our Lord's humility
>
> We turn upon him in sense most true:
>
> > For what Christ once in humbleness began,
> >
> > We him in glory call, *The Son of Man*.

Others, like the later Augustans, Dryden and Pope, were more strident in their attempts to bolster the connection between human and divine artfulness. As we have noted, both sought to burnish the so-called great chain of being and thereby bind the work of God and man in a comprehensive and comprehensible unity. Yet, at the same time, both presented such a unity in a less prosaic way. In order to speak of things divine, it was necessary to call on a different voice, and the use of metaphor and irony serve an important artistic and, ultimately, theological function. Take, for example, Dryden's *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day* (1687), which though, of course, celebrating the particular metaphor of the musical harmony that finds its roots in God, nonetheless, exhibits the same ascendant principle at work in the divine creation:

> From harmony, from heavenly harmony
>
> This universal frame began:
>
> When Nature underneath a heap
>
> Of jarring atoms lay,
>
> And could not heave her head,
>
> The tuneful voice was heard from high:
>
> "Arise ye more than dead."
>
> Then cold, and hot, and moist, and dry,
>
> In order to their stations leap,
>
> And Music's power obey.
>
> From harmony, from heavenly harmony
>
> This universal frame began:
>
> From harmony to harmony
>
> Through all the compass of the notes it ran,
>
> The diapason closing full in man.[286]

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[286] John Dryden, *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day*, in *The Major Works*, ed. by Keith Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 316-7.

Reinforcing the developing Augustan confidence in the mechanics of God's creativity and its assumed vital connection with man's artistic sensibilities, we are asked in Pope's *Essay on Man*, in his attempt to 'vindicate the ways of God to man', the following rhetorical questions:

> Say first, of God above, or Man below,
>
> What can we reason, but from what we know?
>
> Of Man, we see but his station here,
>
> From which to reason, or to which refer?
>
> Thro' world's unnumber'd tho' the God be known,
>
> 'Tis ours to trace him only in our own,
>
> He, who thro' vast immensity can pierce,
>
> See worlds on worlds compose one universe,
>
> Observe how system into system runs,
>
> What other planets circle other suns,
>
> What vary'd being peoples ev'ry star,
>
> May tell why Heav'n has made us as we are.
>
> But of this frame the bearings, and the ties,
>
> The strong connections, nice dependencies,
>
> Gradations just, has thy pervading soul
>
> Look'd thro'? or can a part contain the whole?
>
>   Is the great chain, that draws all to agree,
>
> And drawn supports, upheld by God, or thee?[287]

Such rhetoric, of course, must be studied through the filter of irony which pervades Pope's *Essay*. He was clearly aware of the tension that existed in the presentation of man's place in the universe. As Nuttall succinctly puts it:

> Pope's fluid antithesis of pride and humility has swiftly grown until it encapsulates one of the primary philosophical tensions of the poem; that is, the tension between a view of man which confines him to merely human concerns and the grand metaphysical overview of man in relation

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[287] Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man* I.i., pp. 14-17.

to God and the creation, which at one and the same time provides a rationale for the first view and violates it.[288]

The importance of Pope's ironic stance notwithstanding, it is reasonable to assume that the poem serves as an example of, if not theological optimism, then of a quiet confidence in the demonstration of a divinely ordered universe which can be apprehended both morally and intellectually.

But, as Branch illustrates for us, through her study of the Puritan literature, it also points us towards the use of language in what we now call the novel. She suggests that it was this inward turn and the almost pathological requirement for some empirical spiritual assurance, which laid the foundations for novelists such as Defoe and Richardson to produce their work in later years. If this assessment is correct, how then does the fictive nature of the novel in Henry Fielding's hands display the place and utilisation of language in the divine-human drama? Can the fictive word lead us back to the Word?

Samuel Richardson clearly thought as much. Both *Pamela* (1740-41) and *Clarissa* (1747-48) were presented primarily as religious works whose purpose was, in the face of an increasingly mercantile and godless society, to inculcate, not only a sound ethical framework, but also an active religious sensibility. The numerous biblical motifs which pepper both novels, collectively serve as a stabilizing force against the potential moral chaos which engulfs both Pamela and Clarissa. For example, the fickle nature of the human heart becomes a recurring theme in *Pamela*.[289] It serves a double function in the work. Not only does it entail the straightforward moral assessment of the human condition based on Jeremiah 17. 9, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?', but it reveals Pamela's own inconsistent feelings toward Mr B. In her confused passion she exclaims:

> 'O credulous, fluttering, throbbing mischief. that art so ready to believe
> what thou wishest: and I charge thee to keep better guard than thou lately

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[288] A. D. Nuttall, *Pope's Essay on Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), p. 54.
[289] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, ed. by Peter Sabor (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 157, 257, 280, 284.

hast done, and tempt me not to follow too implicitly thy flattering impulses.

Thus foolishly dialogued I with my heart; and yet, all the time, this heart was Pamela.'[290]

Richardson thereby 'sanctifies Pamela's moral ambivalence, placing it within the broader scheme of scripturally sanctioned human frailty'.[291]

The character and motivation of Pamela provided Henry Fielding with the ammunition he required to develop his own subversive strategy. Fielding's antipathy to Richardson's novel is well documented.[292] He quickly produced his response in the form of *Shamela* (1741). In this satire, it is instructive at the outset to witness the clerical correspondents who, in effect, become both the critics of the work and the criticised within the work. We are immediately confronted with the unsteady nature of the entire theological edifice that both Parson Tickletext and Parson Oliver wish to support. What do these two figures represent? Is it the moral stability of the church or, rather, is it the secret lascivious delight of the chap-book classes who revel in reading about a woman at the mercy of a sexual predator? Are these two stout moral guardians or merely a pair of opportunistic voyeurs? The names of both clerics serve as a focus of this particular ambiguity. The name 'Tickletext' (a parson also to be found in Fielding's play of 1731, *The Grub Street Opera*) holds within it both theological and sexual subtleties, while Oliver (the name of Fielding's Latin teacher) could conceivably represent the puritan and bible-fixated Lord Protector, himself.[293] In each case, the orthodox and the puritan are conflated with the heterodox and the lascivious. We find, then, in these 'critical assessments of Pamela', a deeply subversive strategy at work.

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[290] Ibid., p. 287.

[291] Scott Robertson, 'The Eighteenth-Century Novel' in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, p. 437.

[292] See, for example Claude Rawson, ed., *Henry Fielding* (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 105-6. By contrast, to witness Fielding's remarks of approbation for Richardson's *Clarissa* see Ioan Williams, ed., *The Criticism of Henry Fielding* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 188-90.

[293] Cromwell is mentioned unsympathetically in *The Champion* as the 'usurper'. We learn from Antonia Fraser that, 'The Biblical influence was of course throughout [Cromwell's] life intensely strong. The King James Bible as it was known, the great Authorised Version, had been published in 1611 when he was a boy of twelve, and may be said to be by far the most dominant literary presence in all his letters and speeches'. Antonia Fraser, *Cromwell: Our Chief of Men* (London: Arrow Books, 1997), p. 38.

Moreover, we are, in the reading of Tickletext and Oliver, returned to ourselves and are forced to pose the question: What is it that is being valued here in this text? Is it the virtue of a devout Christian, or is it rather the glorious self-interest of a worldly wench? The answer, I believe, is both. I shall return in to this specific point in my examination of Fielding's novelistic ethics.[294] Suffice it to say that Fielding opens up for us the space which makes us aware of our own moral and intellectual frailty, but in such a way as to leave us with hope and not despair.

In all of this we are returned again and again to Fielding's misplacement of both word and Word in order that we might be free to explore the vagaries of the human condition, not from a position of overarching authority, nor from a place of servility, but in the space opened up by the word which, in its misplacement, provides more than simple admiration or admonition. The word, for Fielding, counters the theological determinism of the Word, and yet he is prepared to submit that self-same word to the misplacement experienced by the Word. There remains for Fielding, a Word to be listened to, but that Word is listened to in the space where the misplaced word is also to be found.

Fielding and 'Pop Scripture'

In his 1972 essay, 'The Rebirth of God and the Death of Man', Leslie Fiedler pointed to what he saw as a new kind of spirituality which was growing out of the counter culture of the 1960s. Much of that essay is now of purely socio-historical interest in that it deals with a very specific cultural phenomenon worked out by and large in a very specific location, viz. North America. However, if one puts those specifics to one side, one can detect an awareness of a broader cultural phenomenon which has not been confined to the Sixties Revolution. Despite the obvious and not so obvious curios which very often obscure a genuine spiritual dimension, the turn to a religion beyond religion outlined by Fiedler, despite obvious time-determined nuances, is to be found, not only in our day, but more significantly for our study, in the eighteenth century itself.

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[294] See Chapter 5.

More germane to our present purpose is the fact that Fiedler recognises the relationship between this turn to religion and literature, and almost prophetically suggests the rise of the 'new religious' novel which seeks to recover all mysteries. He refers specifically to the quest for the Holy Grail and one can see this phenomenon worked out very clearly today in novels such as Dan Brown's, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). Fiedler's comment in this regard is that, while the literature produced by the new religion is not of the quality that, say, Matthew Arnold would have sanctioned in his attempt to save religion from itself, nonetheless it is still *read* as Scripture. What Fiedler suggests is that these books, regardless of literary merit, achieve some kind of sacred status insofar as they appear to provide a focus for some form of spiritual quest or a new way of living. Literature thus, in this counter culture schema, holds within it some kind of spiritual power.

Interestingly, Stephen Prickett has provided ample evidence to support the notion that many of the romantics appropriated Scripture in a similar way to that described by Fiedler. In an extended discussion of Schlegel's philosophical and spiritual journey, quoting from Schlegel's *Philosophical Fragments* (1798) he writes:

> In the world of language or, what is much the same, the world of art and culture, religion necessarily assumes the guise of a mythology or a bible.[295]

This leads Prickett to conclude:

> Schlegel has found the channel through which all his torrent of Romantic ideas can be brought together. The Bible combines poetry, philosophy, the novel and mythology in an inextricable profusion. Religion here can be fused into art. The fragment can hint at unrealisable sublimity and infinite wholes. The Bible constitutes the ultimate anthology from which we constantly shape and reshape our self-understanding.[296]

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[295] Stephen Prickett, *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 203.
[296] Ibid., p. 203.

Can we suggest, however, that the appropriation which Prickett describes was already taking place prior to the Romantic period? Do Fiedler's insights offer us, then, a means to understanding how a text such as a novel by Henry Fielding can be received as, in Fiedler's own term, 'Pop Scripture'? The novelty of the novel in the early part of the eighteenth century, though clearly, for economic and educational reasons, an art form for the few, nonetheless (and this becomes particularly true of the later gothic novel) served, in some sense, as food for the soul. This is clearly the suggestion of Jonathan Barry, who writes:

> While the rising scale of publication, much of it topical, utilitarian or fictional, may well have led those who could afford it into new ways of consuming print, they also generated a counter-tendency which canonised parts of this new culture and the ability to respond to it with sensibility.[297]

The notion of sensibility to which Barry refers, corresponds chiefly to a reaction to or development from the specifically didactic novel.

> Gradually, the kinds of moral precepts that were to have been gleaned through the example of Pamela's or Clarissa's virtuous conduct in extreme circumstances would become secondary to the production of the sentimental *affect*, of a primarily *emotional* response in the reader.[298]

This response was evident in dramatic fashion when Richardson's *Pamela* was being publicly read to a group of villagers. At the climax of the reading, when Pamela marries Mr. B., the villagers were apparently so affected that they rang the church bells.[299] The rise of the so-called 'realistic' novel (leaving aside the difficulties of accurately defining that term) gave 'Augustan novels the impression of being factual as well as fictitious'.[300] This, as we shall examine further in Chapter 6, proved a vital component in the contemporary reception of the novel in the eighteenth century. The

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[297] Jonathan Barry, 'Literacy and Literature in Popular Culture: Reading and Writing in Historical Perspective', in *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850*, ed. by Tim Harris (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 83.
[298] Hammond & Regan, *Making the Novel: Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660-1789*, p. 185.
[299] W. A. Speck, *Society and Literature in England 1700-60* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1983), p. 197.
[300] Ibid., p. 203.

identification of the individual *seen as* an individual and not merely a stock type, had a profound effect, of which Fielding was well aware:

> And here I solemnly protest, I have no intention to vilify or asperse anyone; for though everything is copied from the book of nature, and scarce a character or action produced which I have not taken from my own observations and experience; yet I have used the utmost care to obscure the persons by such different circumstances, degrees, and colours, that it will be impossible for them to guess at them with any degree of certainty; and if it ever happens otherwise, it is only where the failure characterized is so minute, that it is a foible only, which the party himself may laugh at as a well as any other.[301]

Fielding, of course, is once again teasing his readers, but nonetheless provides us with an important aspect of his own fiction. It can be regarded as 'pop scripture' in the sense that it comically, but faithfully points to the populace, and the individual within that populace as real entities. Fielding does of course preface his other fiction with a kind of spiritual apology for the text, for example in the dedication of *Tom Jones* we read:

> I hope my Reader will be convinced, at his very Entrance on this Work, that he will find in the whole Course of it nothing prejudicial to the Cause of Religion and Virtue; nothing inconsistent with the strictest Rules of Decency, nor which can offend even the chastest Eye in the Perusal.[302]

This, too, can be regarded as something of an enticement, but not only in the obvious lascivious sense (which is, no doubt, present) but in the broader sense of the reader recognising themselves as a spiritual, but nonetheless, frail individual. We see, then, in Fielding's fiction, evidence of a spiritual counter-culture which has some affinity with that which Fiedler described. Both are seen as a reaction against a perceived tired

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[301] *Joseph Andrews*, p. 8.
[302] *Tom Jones*, p. 7.

orthodoxy and both see literature as one of its chief sources of inspiration, if not salvation.[303]

We are reminded here, too, of Heidegger's appreciation of the poetry of Hölderlin where the immediate context of the poem becomes virtually irrelevant, and it is the effect of the poem on the individual which becomes paramount. In Heidegger's terms, it is the world that the poem sets up which enables the reader to enter into an awareness of Being. The work of art as 'world creating' is thus what gives it its potency.

It would appear then, that there is some correspondence, between what we have described as spiritual power and the ability of the work of art to create a world. There is, it would seem, a correlation between divine and artistic *fiat*. This is, of course, made explicit in Fielding's own work in that, as we have seen, he makes it quite clear just who the creator is.

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[303] Leslie Fiedler, 'The Rebirth of God and the Death of Man', in *A New Fiedler Reader* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999), p. 365.

<u>Chapter Four</u>

The Art of Blasphemy: Fielding's Comi/C/ritique

And now, ye generation of critics, who raise yourselves up as if it were brazen serpents, to hiss with your tongues, and to smite with your stings, bow yourselves down to your native dust, and acknowledge that yours have been the thoughts of ignorance, and the words of vain foolishness. Lo! ye are caught in your own snare, and your own pit hath yawned for you.[304]

> Thro' Books some travel, as thro' Nations some,
> Proud of their Voyage, yet bring Nothing home.
> Criticks thro' Books, as Beaus thro' Countries stray,
> Certain to bring their Blemishes away.[305]

Artful Criticism

Leslie Fiedler has written that:

Unless criticism refuses to take itself quite so seriously or at least to permit its readers not to, it will inevitably continue to reflect the finicky canons of the genteel tradition and the depressing pieties of the Culture Religion of Modernism, from which Eliot thought he had escaped – but which in fact he only succeeded in giving a High Anglican tone: 'It is our business as readers of literature, to know what we like. It is our business as Christians, *as well as* readers of literature, to know what we ought to like.' But not to know that such stuff is funny is to be imprisoned in Church, cut off from the liberating privilege of comic sacrilege.[306]

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[304] Walter Scott, *Old Mortality*, ed. by Peter Davidson & Jane Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 6.
[305] Henry Fielding, 'Of True Greatness' in *Miscellanies* Vol. I, p. 24.
[306] Leslie Fiedler, 'Cross the Border – Close the Gap', in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), pp. 464-5.

Fiedler, writing in the 1970s, reflected an apparently growing pessimistic strain over the future of the novel and its accompanying critique. While one may query such polemical pessimism (after all, despite anxieties over the future of literary criticism, it seems clear that the book trade itself is not about to implode),[307] what remains of interest is Fiedler's connection of any such pessimism with religion. Being stuck on the modernist treadmill is (to mix metaphors) a bit like being trapped in a lift with a fundamentalist – there is an awful lot to be listened to, but little that is of any discernible use. The association of modernist criticism with the church is, however, not simply a convenient or cheap metaphor. For Fiedler, it places criticism in its proper interrogative context – the Inquisition. The self-generating critical apparatus which, at one time found itself as the poor man of the university, striving to find, if not a place in the higher echelons of the Academy, at least some semblance of respectability, now, according to Fiedler, believes itself to be the presiding judge of literature – a veritable cultural Torquemada. (We are reminded, here, of the comments of Christopher Hitchens regarding the role of literature, in my Introduction). The reality, however, is very different. According to Fiedler, 'Established critics may think that they have been judging recent literature; but, in fact, recent literature has been judging them.'[308] Moreover, in criticism's rapprochement with system and respectability, there has been a wilful avoidance of the fact that criticism is itself a work of art. For Fiedler 'criticism is literature or it is nothing'.[309]

One can trace something of this development of fortunes in the history of critical studies by glancing at Oscar Wilde's largely positive or, more accurately, aesthetic view of the task of the critic in his Socratic dialogue, 'The Critic As Artist' (1891). Wilde has Gilbert exclaim:

> But surely, Criticism is itself an art. And just as artistic creation implies
> the working of the critical faculty, and, indeed, without it cannot be said to
> exist at all, so Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word.

The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour or the unseen world of passion and of thought. […] It works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful.[310]

Wilde's view of the task of the critic is, then, governed by an assumed aesthetic sensibility. Whether such a sensibility results in any accurate perceptions is, for Wilde, immaterial. The assumption that criticism, for example, ought to see the object as it is in itself:

[I]s a very serious error, and takes no cognisance of Criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another. […] Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter? That mighty and majestic prose of his, so fervid and so fiery-coloured in its noble eloquence, so rich in its elaborate symphonic music, so sure and certain, at its best, in subtle choice of word and epithet, is at least as great a work of art as any of those wonderful sunsets that bleach or rot on their corrupted canvases in England's Gallery.[311]

Such glorious subjectivity has no place in the modern criticism so ridiculed in Italo Calvino's, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*. In an attempt to establish the true nature of the novel he has purchased, our 'hero' finds himself at the publishing house:

The corridors of the publishing house are full of snares: drama cooperatives from psychiatric hospitals roam through them, groups devoted to group analysis, feminist commandos. […] You have turned up here at a time when those hanging around publishing houses are no longer aspiring poets or novelists, as in the past, would-be poetesses or lady writers; this is the moment (in the history of Western culture) when self-realization on paper is sought not so much by isolated individuals as by

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[310] Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic As Artist', in *Intentions* (London: Methuen & Co., 1913), pp. 137-139.
[311] Ibid., p. 141.

collectives: study seminars, working parties, research teams, as if intellectual labour were too dismaying to be faced alone.[312]

Criticism has moved from a halcyon period, where art is the focus of both artist and critic, to the apparent nightmare of the death of the author and the creation of the modern Prometheus, otherwise known as Modern Criticism. Returning to Fiedler, we can see that he was, of course, speaking from the perspective of American literary studies, but one can see that his assessment has wider implications. The type of synchronic criticism that has already been alluded to in this thesis is not, it appears, confined to studies of Fielding. The temptation to provide 'fixed' or, in D.H. Lawrence's terminology, 'nailed-down' readings of texts, ignores the very openness of such texts. In other words, a purely formalist critique cannot, according to Fiedler, survive the so-called postmodern novel. This inability to preserve the desire to pin down the text is graphically and amusingly illustrated once more in *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, in the developing relationship between the 'hero' and Miss Zwida:

> In addition there is the fact that this girl's application in drawing seashells denotes in her a search for formal perfection which the world can and therefore must attain; I, on the contrary, have been convinced for some time that perfection is not produced except marginally and by chance; therefore it deserves no interest at all, the true nature of things being revealed only by disintegration. If I were to approach Miss Zwida, I would have to express some appreciation of her drawings – which are of a highly refined quality, for that matter, as far as I have been able to see – and therefore, at least at first, I would have to pretend to agree with an aesthetic and moral ideal that I reject, or else declare my feelings at the very start, with the risk of wounding her.[313]

Calvino comically encapsulates the cultural dilemma of man caught between the desire for perfection and the fragility of human experience. It is a cultural version of Luther's less than cheerful theological understanding of the lot of humanity as being,

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[312] Italo Calvino, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 96.
[313] Ibid., p. 57.

in Oberman's words, 'caught between God and the Devil'.[314] For Fiedler, the modernists have sought to be on the winning side, but have, in their struggle for perfection, lost sight of the fragility of the material they were always working with. My contention, as has been noted, is that this same critical myopia can be applied retrospectively to eighteenth-century fiction generally and, of course, for our purposes, to the novels of Henry Fielding in particular.

Fielding, himself, with characteristic charm, also points out this self-same dilemma two hundred and thirty years earlier in *Tom Jones*, where, in reckoning with the legitimacy of 'prosai-comi-epic Writing', he asks:

> Who ever demanded the Reasons of that nice Unity of Time or Place which is now established to be so essential to dramatic Poetry? What Critic hath ever been asked, Why a Play may not contain two Days as well as one? Or why the Audience (provided they travel, like Electors, without any Expence) may not be wafted Fifty Miles as well as Five? Hath any Commentator well accounted for the Limitation which an antient Critic hath set to the Drama, which he will have contain neither more nor less than five acts? Or hath any one living attempted to explain, what the modern Judges of our Theatre mean by that Word *low*; by which they have happily succeeded in banishing all Humour from the Stage, and have made the Theatre as dull as a Drawing-room? Upon all these Occasions, the World seems to have embraced a Maxim of our Law, *viz. Cuicunque in Arte sua perito credendum est* (Anyone expert in his profession must be believed). For it seems, perhaps, difficult to conceive that any one should have enough of Impudence, to lay down dogmatical Rules in any Art or Science without the least Foundation. In such cases, therefore, we are apt to conclude, there are sound and good Reasons at the Bottom, though we are unfortunately not able to see so far.[315]

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[314] See Heiko A. Oberman, *Martin Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), especially pp. 104-106.
[315] *Tom Jones*, V.i.137.

The fragility of the human situation is understood all too clearly by Fielding and this is what he seeks to present in his work. There is no desire for perfection, yet there is equally no limitation on Fielding's part to discern what it is in the human condition that can be considered potentially glorious. It is such 'potential glory' that colours so much of Fielding's fiction enabling a more open and less ideologically driven reading. However, in order for us to reach this destination we must confront, like Christian in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the ideological beast known as Blasphemy. For, as I will show, it is through such dark channels that the liberating power of the novel can be discerned.

The Misplaced Heart of Blasphemy

Our first stop-off on this journey is in fact a return to Fiedler's essay, where he amplifies his comparison of criticism with the church, by associating the Old Novel with what he describes as the Old God. This 'Old God', though not explicitly defined, is clearly aligned with the dead hand of prescription and system – a God who is neither a liberator nor an innovator. There is an obvious resonance in such a dualistic account of God between Fiedler and the second century heretic, Marcion. The witness of Irenaeus is, therefore, useful:

> Marcion […] developed his school, advancing the most daring blasphemy
> against Him who is proclaimed as God by the law and the prophets,
> declaring Him to be the author of evils, a lover of war, inconstant in
> judgement, and contrary to Himself.[316]

Marcion, in *The Contradictions*, tells us that the father of Jesus Christ was the Unknown God of Acts 17:23.[317] Like Marcion, Fiedler views the Old God, as the constraining One, the mighty and vengeful One. The Old God of criticism cannot therefore fulfil the changed expectations of today's readers. There is a strong echo here of the work of Blanchot who, in his essay 'How is Literature Possible?' points out the 'terror' tactics of criticism:

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[316] Irenaeus I.24,25.1 in *A New Eusebius*, ed. by J. Stevenson (London: SPCK, 1974), p. 97.
[317] W.H.C.Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1986), p. 214.

This terror, whose decrees have dominated the world of letters for the past 150 years, expresses a need for purity, a preoccupation with rupture which goes as far as forgetting the accepted conditions of language. […] Terror, in brief, as the enemy of the commonplace and rules, is engaged in a fight against a sickness of language, and in the fear that words, left to themselves and freed from their meaning, might exert over the minds and hearts of men a formidable power, this terror attempts to restore to inspiration and creative force a boundless empire.[318]

He argues, further, that such terror is, in fact, based upon an illusion that the author is the sole focus of critical attention. Rather, it is the reader who works with words and who is always exposed to the unintentionality and openness of texts. Fiedler believes that such a terrorist regime must be overthrown, and a new God be put in place. This new God resembles the Unknown God of Marcion in that its very mystery points to the openness that he sees as vital to the survival and progress of the entire critical project. Such openness has, at its heart, a less serious, dogmatic approach to literary studies. In other words, as I have noted, its primary recognition is of its own nature as literature, and not as something rarefied and beyond that which it critiques. The New God then, is an immanent God. But, more than this, he is also the comical God. For the comical God points to the reality of true artistic freedom.

In this regard, Robert Polhemus has argued that 'when we discover the comic motive and understanding in great works of art, we go straight to the heart of civilisation'.[319] Culture and divinity are therefore conjoined in the comic. But such a synchronicity is not without a challenge from those who would seek to see comedy as a lesser mode of artistic expression or human experience. To equate the divine with comedy brings us in touch with, in Polhemus's words, 'the stigma of sacrilege'.[320] There is a dangerous quality about the comic. Institutions, both religious and cultural, fear its free and playful nature. So much so that, as Huizinga makes clear:

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[318] Maurice Blanchot, 'How is Literature Possible?', in *The Blanchot Reader*, pp. 50-51.
[319] Robert M. Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 6.
[320] Ibid., p. 7.

Since the 18th century, art, precisely because it is recognised as a cultural factor, has to all appearances lost rather than gained in playfulness. But is the net result a gain or a loss? One is tempted to feel, as we felt about music, that it was a blessing for art to be largely unconscious of its high purport and the beauty it creates. When art becomes self-conscious, that is, conscious of its own grace, it is apt to lose something of its eternal childlike innocence.[321]

We are reminded here, once more, of Fiedler's complaint over the serious-mindedness of modern criticism. Huizinga neatly sums up the conflict that Fiedler was later to champion when he states, 'Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play.'[322] As experience teaches us, authorities, both ecclesiastical and secular, suspect such comedic pretensions. Polhemus outlines the institutional mentality:

Developing religious and cultural authority sought to suppress or to control and channel the ridicule in mirth and its celebration of physical pleasure. Ridicule can threaten elites, can be disruptive, and the pursuit of pleasure can upset the principle of deferred gratification upon which developing societies depend in order to grow strong. The material world is unpredictable, and physical being decays; that, no doubt, is why the mystery religions -- culminating in Christianity -- succeeded so well in establishing themselves. They could promise a reality beyond the reality of unstable matter -- a surety and salvation that supposedly did not rely on the caprice of nature or the unreliable agencies of men.[323]

The church, uneasy at the potential for the gospel of liberation to be overtaken by licence becomes, therefore, yet another substantial controlling and containing presence. We are brought into the realm of the censor and the witch-finder.

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[321] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Paladin, 1956), p. 229.
[322] Ibid., p. 21.
[323] Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 9.

In all of this, as the earlier quotation from Irenaeus makes abundantly clear, we are once more confronted with the spectre of blasphemy. In the current political and religious climate, the term 'blasphemy' is in danger of becoming overloaded with unwelcome potentiality. So much so, that it can lose any sense of meaning under a veil of political opportunism or religious reaction. Nonetheless, it remains an important critical concept in this study and, as such, is worthy of exploration both at the etymological and functional levels.

Our English word 'blasphemy' stems, of course, from the Greek, βλασφήμέω, which is itself a derivative of the conjunction between βλαπτω (to hinder) and φήμη ('reputation' or 'fame').The resultant field of meaning becomes clearly 'a spoken word that is hurtful to the reputation'. Ultimately, it is this field of meaning which is, in a sense, both simultaneously expanded and limited to apply to the divine. However, when we learn that φήμη, itself, is derived from φως meaning 'light', 'shine' or 'make manifest', then it appears at an etymological level, that blasphemy contains within it the seeds of both obfuscation and illumination, of hindrance and advancement. 'Blasphemy', then, to adopt Derrida's terminology, becomes an intrinsic 'binary opposite'. At its textual roots it remains ambiguous.

This etymological ambiguity, when released into the specific semantic context of the Bible itself, offers us two great examples of blasphemy in the shape of both Job and Jesus. In Job we have the saint who, having lost all that was dear to him, sits in silence and in ashes for seven days. Only then does he open his mouth and, as he does so, he openly curses the entire cosmos, and by extension, the God behind it:

> Perish the day when I was born
> and the night which said, 'A man is conceived'!
> May that day turn to darkness; may God above not look for it,
> nor the light of dawn shine on it.
> May blackness sully it, and murk and gloom,
> cloud smother that day, swift darkness eclipse its sun.[324]

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[324] Job 3. 1-5.

Job, in his cursing, attempts to negate the creation narrative. The imagery that he adopts is broadly similar to that found in Genesis, but in his curse he overturns it. So instead of light we have darkness; instead of lights to separate, we have perpetual night. As Perdue puts it, 'Job's use of sacred language in curse and lament is designed to awaken chaos to destroy'.[325] Later, in his closing assault (chs. 29-31), Job begins by recounting his own blissful existence and concludes, in opposition to the contentions of Eliphaz in chapter 22, that he has lived an entirely blameless life. As a consequence, one must assume that 'if Job is indeed innocent, God by implication must either be guilty or forced to respond to the indictment of misgoverning creation'.[326] When God does deign to make an appearance, what is most striking is that Job, in contrast to his comforters, is praised for the way he has spoken about God. This leads Perdue to conclude:

> In finding for Job over against his friends, what God does is vindicate Job's stringent questioning of divine justice and deconstruction of the friends' false theology of retribution and unquestionable sovereignty.[327]

In other words, here Job is paradoxically praised for his blasphemy insofar as it leads to a more authentic view of faith.

This paradox is even more acute in the person of Jesus, who is consistently accused of being a blasphemer by his opponents and is ultimately executed as such.[328] From the Christian perspective, of course, this is a *felix culpa*, a blessed blasphemy, in that the crime which led Jesus to death and utter alienation from God (the proper punishment for a blasphemer) actually releases the true blasphemers, ourselves.

Further, when Jesus, himself, speaks about blasphemy, he immediately indicates that it can be forgiven. However, there is one exception - when it is placed in the context of the identifying of that which is holy as evil – the so-called sin against the Holy

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[325] Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1991), p. 97.
[326] Ibid., p. 183.
[327] Ibid., p. 239.
[328] See the interesting approach of Jack Miles who entitles one of his chapters 'The Lord of Blasphemy' - Jack Miles, *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* (London: William Heinemann, 2001), pp. 155-212.

Spirit.[329] What appears to be the blasphemy here is not a particular act as such, but rather, a direct ontological association between two opposites. Jesus is here rebuking the tendency to assume an unattainable perspective. In other words, the true blasphemy lies, not in individual doctrine, but in the determinism into which any such doctrine can descend. There is, then in Jesus's mind, a need to be always open to the other. The irony here, of course, is that it is just such a deterministic outlook which proscribed Jesus as a blasphemer and sent him to his death. To his opponents the freedom that Jesus preached was regarded as blasphemous; for Jesus, it was just the opposite.

Moving from the pages of Scripture and to the period under discussion, we find that, in the eighteenth century, there is exhibited a similar level of practical dubiety. The ambiguous nature of the blasphemous is echoed in the difficulty to be found in the eighteenth century in determining the precise nature of heterodox belief. Bishop Francis Hare of Chichester (1671-1740) indicated the slipperiness of 'blasphemy' when he described it as 'a Term, which there is a strange *Magick* in, though it has *no determinate Meaning* in the Mouth of the People, nor any *ill Meaning* in it self'.[330] A climate of mistrust therefore could be discerned both within and beyond the prevailing Anglican hegemony. As Leslie Stephen stated long ago, 'the zeal for true religion did not in those days burn with the purest of flames.'[331] Granted that such suspicion did not result in the hysterical reaction that earlier witch hunts had produced, nonetheless it appears that a zeal for orthodoxy led to many, foolish or brazen enough to question the party line, being vilified. Hare testifies to the practical impossibility of defending oneself against the imputation of heresy/blasphemy:

> If you are guilty of no open Vices, secret ones will be imputed to you; Your Enquiries will be called *Vain*, *Curious* and *Forbidden* Studies. Pride and Ambition will be said to be the secret Springs of them. A *Search after Truth*, will be called a *Love of Novelty*. The doubting of a single Text, will be *Scepticism*; the denial of an Argument, a *renouncing of the Faith*. To

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[329] Matthew 12. 31.

[330] Roger Lund, *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5.

[331] Sir Leslie Stephen, *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1902), p. 205.

say what the Scriptures have said, and in the very same Words too, if not explained in the common Way, will be *Blasphemy*; and the most sincere Concern for the Honours of Almighty God, you cannot be sure will not be interpreted *down-right Atheism*.[332]

Thus, there is both a semantic and cultural ambiguity at play regarding blasphemy in general, and more specifically in the period in which the novel comes to birth. The Anglican Church found its authority under threat from within and without, and its vigorous response (outlined by Hare above), some have argued, served precisely to both exacerbate the apparent threat of deism or freethinking, and, at the same time, to shore up its own increasingly tenuous political if not theological legitimacy. In his study, *The Enlightenment and Religion*, S.J. Barnett has forcefully suggested that this is precisely what happened. He summarises his position thus:

> The central question is: should we accept the proclaimed fears of eighteenth-century thinkers as a true reflection of reality? If they were real fears, did they necessarily reflect the actual existence of deists or even a movement of them? In short, the answer is negative: on this subject, what we read in the historical record is for the most part the furies and prejudices of writers, rather than actual observations.[333]

Barnett's conclusion is that the so-called deist controversy was anything but. Lund agrees, when he states:

> Despite the insistence of orthodox polemicists that modern infidels – variously described as hordes, tides, shoals, herds, etc. – threatened to overwhelm the nation, one is struck by their numerical insignificance in comparison with a *perceived threat* assuming near mythical proportions.[334]

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[332] Lund, *The Margins of Orthodoxy*, p. 5.
[333] S.J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 11.
[334] Lund, *The Margins of Orthodoxy*, p. 11.

There appears, then, to be a gap or hesitation between the experience of reality and unreality in this period of cultural and scientific ferment. A space appears to exist that indicates an anxiety over the apparent blurring of the boundaries which hitherto had protected our secure understanding of our God, our world and ourselves. There is a nervous pause for breath prior to the plunge. Clearly, such a dichotomy has, as Barnett would quickly suggest, an overtly political foundation, one that has cast long shadows into our own day. One need only think of such recent catch-all blandishments as 'the war on terror' to recognise this as a phenomenon based upon a certain cosy insecurity – a secure insecurity. In this respect, it is curious to notice the similarities between the ferment of the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries. It is equally intriguing to note that the same 'nervous pause' that is created out of a sense of epistemological frailty becomes the moment where artistic creativity can flourish. Indeed, as David Lawton has indicated, 'Blasphemy almost always involves representation, through texts, languages and performances.'[335]

We are here reminded, too, of Blanchot's description of literature's inaccessible and inescapable space (*L'Espace littéraire*). As Blanchot, himself, describes the dilemma, 'the impossibility of reading is the discovery that now, in the space opened by creation, there is no more room for creation.'[336] The creation of the work of literature both confines and liberates. In its very existence it points to the instability and fragility of the created order. The work of literature is itself nothing; but, at the same time, it simply *is*. It 'reduces itself to being' and its very ambiguity thereby threatens the nature of truth. It is this 'reduction', echoing the 'nervous pause' outlined above, which is energised by blasphemy, the assault upon the bastions of the traditional demarcations of reality and unreality, of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, of fact and fiction.

Recognising this 'nervous pause' and though unwilling to dissent from Barnett's historical assessment, I would, however, prefer to concentrate, less on the political machinations of the interested parties, than upon the influence of such a cultural bi-polarity over the texts that were being produced at the time. I would argue that such

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[335] David Lawton, *Blasphemy* (Philadelphia: The University of Philadelphia Press, 1993), p. 17.
[336] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 24.

blasphemous reality/unreality holds within it the possibilities for a more open understanding of the works of Henry Fielding. All in all, we can clearly discern that this was an era of mounting epistemological tension poised, as I have already noted, on the defining cusp of the Enlightenment. The novel, emerging at this specific time, reveals such tension and Henry Fielding, in particular, recognises both the serious and ludicrous nature of the cultural and theological dilemma. Alain Cabantous has vividly pointed to the irony that 'blasphemy *founded* Christianity'.[337] Richard Holloway has argued in a similar vein:

> The very existence of the idea of blasphemy suggests that acute anxiety about its claims has been embedded in religion since the beginning. Like a social climber in denial about its lowly origins, religion refuses to admit its dodgy start in life.[338]

Can we suggest, however, that blasphemy also founded that other artistic social climber, the novel, in that the work of fiction, as expressed in the previous chapter, reflects the mocking of the creative act as a perennial means of recreating and thereby re-discovering the blasphemous truth of human experience? Can we argue that the novel recognises and exploits the 'nervous space' by providing an artistic reflection of this selfsame tension?

True Lies: Blasphemy and the Novel

To begin to answer these questions it is salutary to recognise an immediate conflict of interest which, in itself, is illustrative of the 'nervous space' outlined above. One significant but inevitable by-product of the modernist critics' desire to gain respectability in the Academy has been the re-emergence of a love-hate relationship, first witnessed to in Plato, between literary studies and philosophy.

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[337] Alain Cabantous, *Blasphemy*, trans. by Eric Rauth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 5.

[338] Richard Holloway, *Between the Monster and the Saint: Reflections on the Human Condition* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), p. 123.

It is arguable that the period in literary history which more than any other illustrated this 'permanent tension' is the so-called long eighteenth century, encapsulating, as it does, the Enlightenment project and the development of the novel itself. The immediate focus of such tension at this time, as far as the novel is concerned, lay in the presentation of nature.[339] While having considered regard for the Platonic notion of the 'ideal', eighteenth-century artists increasingly wished to display such reverence for classical tradition within a domestic setting. This desire, of course, coincided with the scientific revelation/revolution of the domesticated status of our own planet. The Earth was no longer the centre of the universe and the corresponding notions of a heaven above and a hell beneath, as a result, lost some of their enchanting vigour. The biblical epics, which sustained such a theologically driven cosmological view, could no longer be literally supported themselves, and the way was opened at this early stage for art to somehow fill the threatening epistemological chasm. As the old truths found themselves in retreat, so the presentation of truth in art became of crucial importance. These 'necessary falsehoods', as Augustine described works of fiction which pointed to truth,[340] were to increasingly dominate the cultural landscape. They were also to engender an associated new critical background literature which sought to determine the legitimacy or otherwise of this novel form. Yet, the desire to present the truth was immediately and thereafter consistently brought into question by the very fictive means adopted to achieve this laudable aim.

How truth is managed in the novel becomes, then, an intriguing question for the early exponents of the new form. Strategies ranged from, for example, the somewhat artless presentation of truth (particularly moral truth) in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) (whose 'biographical' techniques were, in truth, thought suspect),[341] through the 'true' analysis of feeling and emotion in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1746), to Laurence Sterne and his scatalogically subversive *Tristram Shandy* (1751). The novel, in its desire to present reality, became an epistemological laboratory. Within this laboratory, Henry Fielding is well aware of both the prevailing desire to present the truth, and its accompanying dangers. In *Tom Jones*, he criticises those historians who,

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[339] See, for example, Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 78-90.
[340] St. Augustine, *Earlier Writings*, ed. by J. H. S. Burleigh (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 51.
[341] See, for example, Everett Zimmerman, *Defoe and the Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1975), especially pp. 20-47.

for the sake of voluminousness, refuse to omit even the most mundane detail, and goes on to describe his understanding and presentation of time and narrative in his own 'history':

> Now it is our Purpose in the ensuing Pages to pursue a contrary Method. When any extraordinary Scene presents itself (as we trust will often be the Case) we shall spare no Pains nor Paper to open it at large to our Reader; but if whole Years should pass without producing any Thing worthy his Notice, we shall not be afraid of a Chasm in our History; but shall hasten on to Matters of Consequence, and leave such Periods of Time totally unobserved.
>
> […] My Reader then is not to be surprised if, in the Course of this Work, he shall find some Chapters very short, and others altogether as long; some that contain only the Time of a single Day, and others that comprise Years; in a Word, if my History seems to stand still, and sometimes to fly. For all which I shall not look upon myself as accountable to any Court of Critical Jurisdiction whatever: For I am, in reality, the Founder of a new Province of Writing, so I am at liberty to make what Laws I please therein. And these Laws, my Readers, whom I consider as my Subjects, are bound to believe in and to obey; with which that they may readily and cheerfully comply, I do hereby assure them, that I shall principally regard their Ease and Advantage in all such Institutions: For I do not, like a *jure divino* Tyrant, imagine that they are my Slaves, or my Commodity. I am, indeed, set over them for their own Good only, and was created for their Use, and not they for mine. Nor do I doubt, while I make their Interest the great Rule of my Writings, they will unanimously concur in supporting my Dignity, and in rendering me all the Honour I shall deserve or desire.[342]

Fielding here, in this typically mischievous passage, recognises an important truth - that truth itself can, in the hands of the artist, be manipulated. In the same way that Galileo and Newton have mastered the nature of the physical universe, and Locke, the

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[342] *Tom Jones*, II.i.53.

nature of human experience and perception, so Fielding claims for himself an overriding control over his own 'Laws'. Such manipulation, he cheekily argues, however, is not done to mislead, but to make the reader's task that much smoother. His is the role of the helpful tourist guide around the Great Creation. The guide knows all the key attractions and chooses to ignore that which, in any case, would be of no interest to the tourist. Fielding says as much again in his Preface to the posthumous *The Journal of A Voyage to Lisbon* (1755) where he writes:

> To make a traveller an agreeable companion to a man of sense, it is necessary, not only that he should have seen much, but that he should have overlooked much of what hath been seen. Nature is not, any more than a great genius, always admirable in her productions.[343]

Yet, despite his good-natured subtlety, Fielding is presenting us with a dilemma. In all his talk of Laws, it is clear that he is aware of the potential for his 'history' to mislead, for his 'truth' to 'lie' - for his Great Creation to be a blasphemy in that it becomes the uncontrollable domain of unfixity. Contemporary critics, like Samuel Johnson, focussed this uncontrollability at the moral level:

> MANY Writers for the sake of following Nature, so mingle good and bad Qualities in their principal Personages, that they are both equally conspicuous; and as we accompany them through their Adventures with Delight, and are led by Degrees to interest ourselves in their Favour, we lose the Abhorrence of their Faults, because they do not hinder our Pleasure, or perhaps, regard them with some Kindness for being united with so much Merit.[344]

Johnson appears to be as aware as Fielding is of the artful presentation of time in a narrative, but he chooses here to confine his criticism to the surface layer of moral behaviour. Yet, even at this superficial level, he seems unable to grasp that literature, as Phillips argues, 'can open our eyes to possibilities of moral seriousness which are

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[343] Henry Fielding, *A Journey from this World to the Next and The Journal of A Voyage to Lisbon*, ed. by Ian Bell and Andrew Varney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 123.
[344] Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler March 1750*, in *Henry Fielding: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Ronald Paulson & Thomas Lockwood (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 233.

wider than those we happen to agree with and wider than those prevalent in a society at any given time.'[345] White puts it more starkly intimating that, for Johnson:

> The standard by which truth and the adequacy of language are measured is a simple one: correspondence with the substantive view of the world he holds, in which plain religious truth is paramount; and, at the level of the individual mind, an integration of the self that renders thought and experience coherent.[346]

Moral considerations override the more fundamental question of how the truth, any truth, can ultimately be pointed to in a work of fiction. Fielding, by contrast, in his aside above, appears more critically cognisant of this particular and profound danger, and interestingly invokes the monstrous divinely appointed despot as a foil for his own benign purposes. God's tyrant may act with profligacy and wrath but, he, the mere creator of his 'Province of Writing', his own small Garden of Eden, remains committed to the well-being of those who venture into his little corner of Paradise. Fielding is the spirit of the good God, hovering over the waters of unbridled chaos.[347] He is the faithful mother God who, when all other mothers have forgotten their creation, will remain true.[348] Fielding's faithfulness to his creation becomes the blasphemous riposte to orthodox (*jure divino)* faithlessness. His story is true history in that he faithfully and honestly misplaces both reality and unreality. One can confidently state that truth lies in Fielding.

A helpful postmodern symmetry to Fielding's subtle marshalling of truth and blasphemy is to be discovered in Milan Kundera's novel, *The Joke* (1967). Kundera's hero (or anti-hero), Ludvik, is expelled from the Communist Party. As a result of a joke concerning Trotsky that he tells to a serious-minded and party-faithful girlfriend, Ludvik is forced to 'volunteer' for work in a mine. The thrust of the novel is, clearly, to emphasise the absurdity of a political system (mirroring the potential activity of Fielding's monstrous divinely sanctioned tyrant) which can so quickly and violently

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[345] D.Z. Phillips, *Through A Darkening Glass: Philosophy, Literature & Cultural Change* (Indiana: University of Notre dame Press, 1982), p. 62.
[346] James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 162.
[347] Genesis 1. 2.
[348] Isaiah 49. 15.

condemn an individual for the sake of a few *clever*, *misplaced* words. The words are *misplaced* only insofar as they do not fit in a society where individual expression is thwarted. They are *clever* (and therefore funny) precisely because they are placed in that selfsame context. These *clever*, *misplaced* words are thus revealed to be blasphemous.

However, the system which condemns Ludvik for blasphemy is itself more subtly condemned for having no sense of humour and, therefore, no sense of creativity and common humanity. Surrounded by the heavy memory of a slowly vanishing cultural heritage, Kundera has his characters struggling with the discovery of a cultural void at the heart of a system they once revered. The violence of communist state suppression is contrasted with the simple cultural expressions of a tired folk festival. And the final joke is that the tired folk festival, for all its trashiness, holds within it greater creative potential.

Blasphemy in *The Joke* has its own obvious political semantic context, but there is, I believe, a deeper subversion at work in that the blasphemy which condemns Ludvik serves also to liberate him from his hitherto subservient attitude to the Party. Blasphemy, then, serves both a deconstructive and a reconstructive function. Indeed, that blasphemy should function in this way is an inevitable consequence of its ultimate association with a joke, i.e. with comedy. The blasphemous joke here becomes, in the terminology of Paul Ricoeur, a 'word-event'. As Ricoeur makes clear, 'Something is said of which I am not the origin, nor the owner.'[349] It points beyond mundane, political realities to the revelatory nature of the absurd. It illustrates David Jasper's principle that:

> What is most "true" in literature, then, is not necessarily derived from what is actually seen and observed, but from what is cast in the furnace of the perceptive and prophetic imagination. Nor should language which is primarily metaphorical and imaginative be regarded as less serious or

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[349] Paul Ricoeur, 'Religion, Atheism, and Faith', in *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, ed. by Alistair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 71.

grounded in matters of basic concern than that which claims to have the authority of scientific or historical verification.[350]

What Jasper claims for the text of Scripture, I would suggest, applies equally across the literary spectrum. I shall, in due course, apply this principle in my discussion of revelation.[351] Indeed, the bipolarity we have discerned in the word 'blasphemy' can be regarded as a means to experiential truth (as opposed to strictly scientifically empirical), and a way through the epistemological conundrum inherited at the Enlightenment. This experiential, subverting truth which attempts to square the epistemological circle of achieving ultimate veracity can be regarded as coterminous with the notion of *mystery*, mentioned earlier in this study. Paul Fiddes explains the options well:

> In thinking about the mystery to which the imagination reaches out, some then will follow a Kantian line in understanding it to be an elusive dimension in our own feelings, pointing to some depth of human values. Others will want to give the mystery a greater objectivity of its own, over against human experience. That is, they will want to retain a "metaphysics", and will argue in support that there are other modes of knowing than observation and deduction relying on the evidence of the senses alone. In our century, Heidegger has spoken of a "primordial thinking" which links as to Being itself, adept in existence which transcends our own merely finite beings.[352]

Helpful though Fiddes analysis is, there is a danger that he attempts to restrict the very notion of mystery he wishes to advance. Fiddes rejects natural theology in favour of a concept of general revelation in which God is present in his world by means of natural human experience. The idea is not that God leaves messages or propositions about himself embedded in the natural world which can then be 'picked up' by the receiving apparatus of the human mind. Rather, he unveils his own being through the vehicle of human and natural events. 'Nature,' Fiddes argues, 'is a place of an encounter with

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[350] David Jasper, *The New Testament and the Literary Imagination* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 32.
[351] See Chapter 6.
[352] Paul Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999), pp. 11-12.

the living God, not a dead-letter drop.'[353] This places mystery too much on the side of the angels. It seems to me that experience indicates that nature can also be equally regarded as the place of abandonment. Is that not to confirm the ultimate blasphemy, that our ever-present awareness is that of absence?

If, at this point we return to Kundera's novel, we discover that it offers us a useful postmodern analogy to the relationship between the competing systems of rationalism and faith as found in the work of Henry Fielding. Kundera's image of a static and unforgiving state juxtaposed with the simplicity, mystery and hopefulness of a Czech folk festival can be seen as an echo of the developing tension between the clinical determination of the Enlightenment enthusiasts (exemplified in Fielding's *Tom Jones* by the philosopher, Square), and the increasingly beleaguered and, in some ways, bewildered religious faithful (witnessed most clearly in *Joseph Andrews* by Parson Adams).

At the outset, however, one must be careful to recognise, as Fielding does, that this tension does not imply a straight forward state of affairs whereby one force for good is under threat from an opposing force for evil. As always, such simple analogies fail; there can be, of course, no direct correlation between the Communist Party of Kundera's novel and the Enlightenment enthusiasts in Fielding's work; but in this case, such analogous failure is important. For Fielding, both the rationalists and the religious can be equally totalitarian. We are left as a result, in Fielding's work, with an important awareness of the ambiguity of blasphemy and the irony that all systems, be they rational or religious, have the capacity both to free and to imprison, to bless and to curse.

Such ambiguity is wonderfully demonstrated in Fielding's, *Joseph Andrews*, where we discover the following exchange between Parson Adams and his long-suffering wife:

> Adams bid his Wife prepare some Food for their Dinner; she said, truly
> she could not, she had something else to do. Adams rebuked her for

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[353] Ibid., p. 31.

disputing his Commands, and quoted many Texts of Scripture to prove *that the Husband is the Head of the Wife, and she is to submit and obey*. The Wife answered, 'it was Blasphemy to talk Scripture out of Church; that such things were very proper to be said in the Pulpit, but that it was profane to talk them in common Discourse.' Joseph told Mr Adams he was not come with any Design to give him or Mrs Adams any trouble; but to desire the favour of all their company to the George (an Alehouse in the Parish), where he had bespoke a Piece of Bacon and Greens for their Dinner. Mrs Adams, who was a very good sort of Woman, only rather too strict in Economics, readily accepted this Invitation, as did the Parson himself by her Example; and away they all walked together…[354]

We are presented here with multiple expressions of comic ambiguity. All of these lead us to the place where we are left floundering, not only as to who is actually the head of this particular household, but also as to the nature of blasphemy, and the identity of the blasphemer. Parson Adams apparently holds the secure authority, not only of his office, but his classical education and, above all, his knowledge of the Scriptures. This impressive legitimating arsenal is, however, powerless before a force which displays none of the merits of status, intellectual endeavour or theological orthodoxy. Adams' wife is displayed in this passage as everything her husband is not. Her combative nature may be the closest attribute that they as husband and wife share, yet the basis of such quarrelsome harmony differs in each case. Adams anchors his fights upon sound, established principle and, as in the passage above, the Scriptures. His wife, on the other hand, simply creates her own principles to establish her position. There can be, in theory, no reconciling these two. And yet, the passage finishes on a point of familial harmony.

Within this ambiguous understanding of domestic authority we encounter the specific use of the word 'blasphemy'. The word is thereby undermined in two ways. Firstly, it finds itself misplaced to the extent that its traditional ecclesiastical and inquisitorial environment is spectacularly reduced to that of a domestic tiff. Such misplacement is highlighted by the fact that there is an immediate theological context within which the

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[354] *Joseph Andrews*, IV.12.253.

term's meaning is explored and exploded. According to Adams' wife, it is blasphemy to use the Scriptures out of the pulpit. On the face of it, one may accuse her of gross ignorance, or, worse, a malevolent bent toward having her own way. Neither of these suggestions does justice to the innocence of both parties and ignores Fielding's deliberate intention which is to subvert the term itself. This is strengthened by the possibility that Fielding was, in fact, cheekily placing the wafer of a Roman Catholic, i.e., heterodox position, into the mouth of the Anglican curate's wife. Such a delicious possibility cannot be claimed with any sense of finality but, nonetheless, it goes to emphasise the level of instability which surrounds theological terms like blasphemy in this text.

Secondly, the fact that the word comes, not from the lips of Adams (out of whose rhetorical armoury, one would expect to enlist such a weapon – he never, in fact uses the term), but from his wife, further emphasises its loss of potency. This does not imply any misogynist intent on Fielding's part. One need only look to his portrayal of Sophia in *Tom Jones* or, to a degree, the eponymous Amelia; or indeed Mrs Heartfree in *Jonathan Wild*, to recognise Fielding's awareness of the positive outworking of the Christian ethic in the 'gentle Sex'. In the current passage, the practical and non-theological Mrs Adams is placed alongside her otherworldly husband – a long-suffering Martha alongside a hearty Church of England Mary. Such placement also gives the lie to the very hysteria, outlined earlier, regarding the nature of the deist or freethinker threat. The cleric is silent while the lay woman pontificates. The result is not an extension of religious mania and a desire for divine retribution. Indeed, if judgement is being pronounced at all in this passage, it is upon Adams, himself. Once again, through a semantic subversion, the blasphemer (Mrs Adams) who criticizes the 'blasphemer' (Parson Adams) becomes ultimately a source of reconciliation. To blaspheme is to subversively point to truth and, as a result, to bring peace.

We are reminded, here, of the therapeutically profane nature of the comedic. In this sense, the comedic expresses a radicalization of theology. It reflects a theology which refuses to compromise with systems which exist in and for themselves. Comic faith is dismissive of human hubris or what Fielding calls 'affectation'. Comic faith becomes the desacralizing force in the temple. Comic faith is the blaspheming hider in the house. As Aichele has it, 'iconoclastic faith is very similar to blasphemy; it justifies the

faithlessness and doubt which defeat man's inclinations to self-deification.'[355] As a result, the place of the orthodox and the heterodox are constantly put into question, with the ultimate purpose of allowing each to become aware of the fragility of their own position.

Fielding and Criticism

As a further means of highlighting the critical harmony between postmodern critics like Fiedler and Calvino, and an early novelist like Henry Fielding, I will now examine the latter's attitude toward the practice and purpose of criticism itself, as well as his assessment of the critics of the day. It would be uncontroversial to state that Fielding was no true friend of the critic. In his work they are described variously as 'little reptiles', 'unmerciful judges', 'slanderers', 'slaves to vice', 'vermin' and 'illiterate' (to name but a few).[356]

However, prior to examining Fielding's specific critique of the critics it is worth mentioning an important point of convergence between blasphemy and criticism, that is the citing of the critic in the context of his 'great Creation':

> This Work may, indeed, be considered as a great Creation of our own; and
> for a little Reptile of a Critic to presume to find Fault with any of its Parts,
> without knowing the Manner in which the Whole is connected, and before
> he comes to the final Catastrophe, is a most presumptuous Absurdity.[357]

Fielding's sliding in of the reptile, not only enhances the image of his blasphemous creation, but also provides us, in the shape of the critic, with the ultimate enemy – Satan himself. In other words, Fielding is subtly defending himself on several fronts, with the broader buttress being the argument that, if his creation is regarded as absurd or blasphemous, (intriguingly, the word 'absurd' shares some of the same root meaning as 'blasphemy' in that there is a mutual connection with 'murmuring') then the critic is the very snake that inhabits the garden of Eden.

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[355] Aichele, *Theology as Comedy*, p. 64.
[356] *Tom Jones*, X.i.337 & XI.I.366 and *The Champion* No.3 Nov. 20th, 1739, in *The Criticism of Henry Fielding*, ed. by Ioan Williams (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 59.
[357] *Tom Jones*, X.i.337.

Moving to Fielding's specific critique, we discover that his ire is directed toward those who, through ignorance or malice, or through second-hand acquaintance only, misunderstand the nature of a work and subsequently publicly malign it. Fielding was well aware of the existence of 'qualified' critics who have 'certainly been authorised to execute at least a judicial Authority in *Foro Literario* (the literary forum)'.[358] However, his theatrical experience had no doubt educated him early as to the scurrilous nature of the critical profession who could make or break a work of art with a stroke of the pen: 'For Slander is a more cruel Weapon than the Sword, as the Wounds which the former gives are always incurable.'[359] Such skulduggery was to bedevil Fielding to the end. His last work of fiction, *Amelia*, was badly received, and Fielding took great pleasure in ridiculing the ridiculers who, he believed, lacked the necessary acumen and experience to pass any considered judgement. In a biting riposte to those who belonged to the 'High Office of Critic', Fielding outlines a number of fundamental qualifications he believes may or may not be of benefit in the execution of their literary endeavour:

> To require what is generally called Learning in a Critic, is altogether as absurd as to require Genius. Why should a Man in this Case, any more than in all others, be bound by any Opinions but his own? Or why should he read by Rule any more than eat by it? If I delight in a Slice of Bullock's Liver or of Oldmixon, why shall I be confined to Turtle or Swift?

> The only Learning, therefore, that I insist upon, is, That my Critic BE ABLE TO READ; and this is surely very reasonable: For I do not see how he can be otherwise called a Reader; and if I include every Reader in the Name of Critic, it is surely very just to confine every Critic within the Number of Readers.[360]

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[358] *Tom Jones*, XI.i.368.
[359] *Tom Jones*, XI.i.366.
[360] 'The Covent Garden Journal', No. 3, in *The Criticism of Henry Fielding*, pp. 67-68. By means of a more recent, polite, but nonetheless forthright critique of the critic see C. S. Lewis' late and unfinished essay 'On Criticism', where, in a similar vein to Fielding, he writes: 'The first thing I have learned from my reviewers is, not the necessity […] but the extreme rarity of conscientiousness in that preliminary work which all criticism should presuppose. I mean, of course, a careful reading of what one criticises'. C. S. Lewis, 'On Criticism', in *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection*, ed. by Lesley Walmsley (London: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 133.

While we may justifiably find ourselves smiling at a typical thrust of Fielding's penetrating wit, it is important that we do not miss the fundamental point here. Fielding is, in this passage, fulfilling the demand made by Fiedler two centuries later, in that his criticism is itself a conscious work of art. It is precisely one of Fielding's own complaints that such criticism as he encounters shows little in the way of imagination. In the same article cited above, he suggests that it shall not be:

> Sufficient for such Critic to drivel out, *I don't know not I*, *but all that I know is*, *I don't like it*. Provided, nevertheless, that any Reason how foolish or frivolous soever, shall be allowed a good and full Justification; except only the Words POOR STUFF, WRETCHED STUFF, BAD STUFF, SAD STUFF, LOW STUFF, PAULTRY STUFF. All of which STUFFS I do forever banish from the Mouths of all Critics.[361]

Fielding is making the same plea here for the use of the critical imagination that goes beyond the mundane or the crudely analytical. A typical example of the latter would be a ludicrous (and malicious) review of *Tom Jones* which criticized Fielding for his poor sense of topography.[362] Criticism, for Fielding, is not merely standing over and above that which is criticized. It involves an entering into the work of art *as art*. Only then can the critic truly engage with the objective of his critical apparatus.

Fielding provides us with his own critical apparatus in a wonderfully vivid passage designed to point out the arbitrariness of some criticism that relies on a purely 'mechanical' rather than imaginative approach. Fielding 'inherits' what he describes as *The Weather-Glass of Wit* (a by-product of an alchemist's search for the Philosopher's Stone), a piece of machinery that can only be described as a kind of critical thermometer. Such devices were frequently adopted by satirists of the period.

William Hogarth (1697-1764), for example, in his print *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism: A Medley* (1762), *(Fig. 3 below)* provides a mental thermometer that rises out of a "Methodist's Brain." The mercury, here, measures states of enthusiasm and insanity, ranging from cold, melancholic conditions such as "Low Spirits," "Settled

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[361] 'The Covent Garden Journal', No. 3 in *The Criticism of Henry Fielding*, p. 68.
[362] Paulson & Lockwood, eds., *Henry Fielding: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 166-168.

Grief," and even "Suicide" to hot states of sexual excitement, first "Love Heat," "Lust," and "Extacy," and then "Convulsion Fits" and "Raving". Similar devices measuring the human passions were also popular.

Fig. 3

Image courtesy of
THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

By his own device, however, Fielding is able to detect the relative merits of a literary work. He proceeds to tell us how it operates:

> That Morning I happened to take up a *Virgil*. I had no sooner began to read, but I saw the *Spirits* mount up suddenly in the Thermometer, from whence I concluded, but there must have been a very sudden Alteration of the Air; but upon laying the Book aside, to observe the Instrument more exactly, the *Spirits* immediately subsided to their former Pitch. This Accident surprised me pretty much; but I had the greater Reason for Admiration when I observ'd, that the Moment I began to read on, the

Spirits began to ascend again, and that they sunk as soon as ever I left off. I imagined, at first, that my Breath was the Cause of this sudden Change; but I soon laid aside that Thought, as I observ'd, that there was the same Appearance, whether I read aloud or to myself; and whether I was near to, or at a Distance from the *Glass*. Whilst I was in this Perplexity, I took up the first Book which came to hand, which happen'd to be a Volume of Sermons, which had been given to me by an Eminent Divine, when I first went abroad. I had scarcely dipp'd into it, when I saw, to my great Astonishment, that the Liquor, instead of rising, sunk down to the very Bottom of the Tube, and ascended as suddenly, upon my laying the Book aside.[363]

Superficially, one may regard this as a clever means to ridiculing certain low forms of fiction. However, that would be to fall into the temptation that besets all unimaginative critics, namely the desire to condemn rather than comprehend. What Fielding is, in fact, introducing us to is the interactive nature of the text. Fielding, in his *Thermometer*, imaginatively illustrates for us the dynamism of any given text. That he chooses, in the above passage, a volume of sermons to illustrate the 'effectiveness' of his device, becomes then, less of a comment on the nature of sermons than a means of illustrating the dynamic reality of all literary engagement. We are here, transported once again to the land of the Tralfamadorians with their empathetic texts. In the same way that the technology of the Tralfamadorians can generate an overall 'feeling' for the text, so Fielding's own technology provides us with an awareness of the importance of an artistic engagement with the text. An apparently accurate piece of machinery is used to 'measure' the immeasurable. The improbability of the task being achieved is indicative of the open-ended nature of all texts, novels and criticism alike.

Such open-ended artistic engagement for Fielding, then, is the substance of criticism, and it is this artistic engagement which deflects from Fielding the accusation of blasphemy in *Tom Jones*:

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[363] Williams, *The Criticism of Henry Fielding*, p. 126.

That this motely [*sic*] History of Bastardism, Fornication and Adultery, is highly prejudicial to the Cause of Religion, in several Parts of it, is apparent in the gross Ridicule and Abuse which are wantonly thrown on religious Characters. Who reviles the Clergy may be well said to be upon the very Threshold of Immorality and Irreligion […] It is amazing, Sir […] that you should venture on commending a Book so truly profligate, of such evil Tendency, and offensive to every chaste Reader, so discouraging to Virtue and detrimental to Religion.[364]

The anonymous Critic, here, shares none of the artistic engagement which Fielding desperately craves. His superficial accusation bears no understanding of the true blasphemy that is taking place in *Tom Jones*, i.e., the very ambiguity that a text can engender. *Tom Jones* is thus far more than the pathetic sum total of vices portrayed in the passage quoted above. That kind of reductionist criticism cannot, by definition, engage with a text like *Tom Jones*. Such criticism has set itself apart. It has not sought, like Fielding, to dine at 'the Provision of HUMAN NATURE'.[365] As a result, it is no criticism of *Tom Jones* at all, but merely an empty diatribe.

Such salacious comment resonates with that of blasphemy. It is a blasphemy insofar as this slander is upon the creation of an artist. Blasphemy is returning to blasphemy. We are entering here upon the early stages of the metamorphosis that was to be completed in the following century, whereby the status of Scripture and Literature were effectively reversed. In the words of Joss Marsh, literature 'incrementally graduated from an oppositional to an accessory relationship to Scripture'.[366] The novel thus evolves from its blasphemous primordial soup to become, following the title of Northrop Frye's famous work, the Secular Scripture.

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[364] 'Letter from 'Aretine' to George Lyttelton', in Paulson & Lockwood, eds., *Henry Fielding: The Critical Heritage*, p. 168.
[365] *Tom Jones*, I.i.25.
[366] Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 173.

On the journey to that new state, the novel, in Fielding's hands, had to undergo something of a trial. His last novel, *Amelia*, published in 1751 in the glow of the success of *Tom Jones*, was received with less than overwhelming enthusiasm. There were, to be sure, some initial favourable responses, for example, John Cleland's review in the *Monthly Review* of December, 1751 regarded it as 'the boldest stroke that has yet been attempted in this species of writing'.[367] Even Samuel Johnson, we are told, 'read Fielding's *Amelia* through without stopping.'[368] However, it is fair to say that, overall, the book was seen as a backward step. Samuel Richardson, predictably, thought 'the characters and situations so wretchedly low and dirty',[369] and even Fielding's own second cousin and literary benefactor, the redoubtable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), in a letter following Fielding's death wrote, 'All these sort of books have the same fault, which I cannot easily pardon, being very mischievous.'[370] Various reasons are cited for this overwhelmingly negative contemporary reaction. A significant complaint appears to be the description of Amelia, herself, as someone who, though beautiful and honourable in every way, nonetheless has a facial disfigurement. Some less than charitable critics suggested that syphilis was the cause of the condition. The setting of the novel - 'that good-for-nothing London!'[371] - led some to regard it as unfitting for more refined tastes. On the whole, the critical response consists of a disappointment in the drama of the piece, dealing as it does, with the domesticity of marriage, rather than, as in traditional comedy, ending with one.

Subsequent readings of *Amelia* have remained lukewarm, if not downright dismissive. Though not comprehensively supported, the infamous comments of F. R. Leavis which acerbically claimed that by the time Fielding had written *Amelia*, he had 'gone soft', have overshadowed much modern criticism.[372] There are, to be sure, other more

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[367] Rawson, *Henry Fielding: A Critical Anthology*, p. 120.
[368] Ibid., p. 176.
[369] Ibid., p. 130.
[370] Ibid., p. 130.
[371] 'A letter from Catherine Talbot to Elizabeth Carter', in Paulson & Lockwood, eds., *Henry Fielding: The Critical Heritage*, p. 350.
[372] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), p. 4.

moderate but nonetheless similarly dissatisfied critical voices. For example, in his study, *Mask and Feast*, Andrew Wright comments:

> All in all, *Amelia* is not a bad work – I do not wish to suggest, let alone
> press the view that it is bad – but it is deeply flawed because Fielding […]
> abandons the tools of his trade.[373]

By 'tools of his trade' Wright chiefly means Fielding's ability to playfully engage with his reader, specifically by means of the series of prefaces which he 'perfected in *Tom Jones*'. The contrasts with both *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* are obvious. Aside from the overt narratorial omniscience which infuses these earlier novels and gives them their jocular dynamic, these are works of the road. *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* are panoramic, while *Amelia* is, if anything, claustrophobic, dealing as it does with the domestic crisis surrounding the marriage of Amelia and Will Booth, geographically set in the constraining environs of either the sponging house or Newgate Prison, and the immediate London area in which Booth, as a convicted debtor, is only permitted to travel freely on a Sunday.

Wright goes further in his criticism:

> In short, *Amelia* is the work of a Christian fatalist who was losing his faith
> in art; it is the flawed achievement of a great novelist who turned his back
> on his own fictional inventions.[374]

What is certainly cogent about this assessment is that Fielding, indeed, produced no other novel, signing off in the only way he could by writing a mock trial of *Amelia* in *The Covent Garden Journal* in January 1752. Having attempted to defend his 'favourite Child', Fielding solemnly declares before the assemblage of 'Beaus, Rakes, fine Ladies, and several formal Persons with bushy Wigs, and Canes at their noses, pushed forward' (possibly an image of the criticism of Amelia's damaged nose, itself), 'that I will trouble the World no more with any Children of mine by the same Muse.'[375]

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[373] Andrew Wright, *Henry Fielding: Mask and Feast* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 47.
[374] Ibid., p. 50.
[375] Paulson & Lockwood, eds., *Henry Fielding: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 315-317.

However, there are others, for example, Robert Alter, who would not dismiss *Amelia* out of hand and, indeed, despite his awareness of some obvious difficulties in the novel is quite prepared to describe it as 'a work of a writer of genius'.[376] Being more specific in his praise, Alter states:

> It is not enough to say there are good things in *Amelia*; there are things in this book which one simply does not find in the English novel until it reaches a stage of greater technical sophistication, in the nineteenth century.[377]

We are left, then, with the 'problem' of *Amelia*'s ambiguous reception. How is it that it can provide such contemporary and modern-day critical variances? The simplistic answer, of course, is to say that different readers like different things, and that times and tastes change. However, if one examines the criticism of *Amelia* more broadly, we discover that Fielding is condemned (often in the same period), both for the low nature of the subject matter and for his overt didactic presence. He is accused of both flat characterisation, and yet, that his characters are all too real, i.e., that they are unsavoury. He is berated for both providing us with an earthy novel and proffering us a sentimental one. How can these apparently disparate comments cohere?

The answer, I believe, is that they cannot, because in *Amelia*, as all the variations in reception appear to indicate, we find a critically blasphemous novel. It is a work which has, at its core, a degree of instability which is unsettling, leaving 'its larger mysteries impenetrable'.[378] It is a work which both illuminates and obfuscates, in that it contains elements of the 'comic Epic-Poem in prose that Fielding championed in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, but has expanded these in a paradoxically restricted mode. Indeed, *Amelia* becomes rather like the character of Tom Jones himself, an outsider on the road to somewhere, but, as I have already mentioned, that somewhere is actually less determined than we initially suspect. Rawson suspects something of the kind when, in his more generous attempt to come to terms with *Amelia*, writes:

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[376] Robert Alter, *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 177.
[377] Ibid., p. 171.
[378] Peter Sabor, '*Amelia*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry Fielding*, p. 105.

It is no mere question of an elderly flagging talent, for there are things of fierce vitality in all the later writings. It seems instead to be that Fielding's world has ceased to make total sense, so that his reactions have become fragmentary. The phenomenon of Blear-eyed Moll and that of Amelia simply cannot connect: both are noted, and strongly reacted to, but a world in which both exist can only be acknowledged, not 'explained'.[379]

Rawson recognises the feeling of unease that *Amelia* generates but cannot resist attributing some of that unease to Fielding himself. I would argue, however, that it is not necessary or fruitful to second-guess Fielding's frame of mind as he produced the world of *Amelia*, but simply, despite the challenges, to encounter it. In so doing, we remove ourselves form any deterministic approach to the text and allow it to confront us.

Permitting the novel to speak for itself, we discover that the sense of disturbance experienced by the reader is generated chiefly by the conflict between interiority and exteriority. The novel begins its life in the claustrophobic and dangerous world of the debtor's prison, and this intimidating atmosphere overshadows the various twists and turns that Fielding provides throughout the text. To this extent, one can detect an early trace of what was to become a favourite motif of the gothic novel. However, it is reasonable to state that, in terms of narrative structure and character development, *Amelia* provides us with a greater degree of sophistication than is to be found in the vast majority of such novels, (with the possible exception of William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) and *Fleetwood* (1805)).[380]

As has been noted, the novel focuses upon an existing marriage, rather than leading to one, and here we find that the same dichotomy of interiority/exteriority is in evidence. Marriage is regarded as the place of apparent paradisal security which contrasts with the bleak security of the debtor's prison and its surrounding environs. In addition, the naïve and impulsive Booth is consistently torn between the domestic bliss offered by

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[379] Claude Rawson, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress*, pp. 96-97.

[380] I have argued elsewhere, that both *Caleb Williams* and *Fleetwood* are expressive of Godwin's own coming to terms with a loss of faith, and the security which that faith brought him. Scott Robertson, 'Freedom and Frailty: The Place of the Individual in Key Novels by Henry Fielding and William Godwin (unpublished master's thesis, The Open University, 2002), p. 34. It is also fair to point out that the Richardsonian novels *Pamela* and particularly *Clarissa* may also be regarded as proto-gothic in that they, too, deal with what are, effectively, prison worlds.

his faithful Amelia, and a succession of 'opportunities' both legal and illicit which he encounters beyond the family home. To this extent, as Blewett has indicated, 'the union of William and Amelia Booth is menaced both from without and within'.[381] By placing marriage and prison in such close proximity, we are left with uncomfortable awareness of the possibilities of each influencing the other. Marriage, then, becomes a prison for Booth; and the debtor's prison, an unexpected opportunity for advancement.

As a result, and as I noted in Chapter 2, we become increasingly aware of the ambiguity of character in *Amelia*. The motif of the mask displays for us that same insecurity, whereby a stable understanding of individual character remains elusive. Even at the novel's most transparent moment, i.e., the conversion of Booth, we are still in doubt as to what change has actually taken place. It is instructive to contrast this conversion with Fielding's remarks in his satirical *Jonathan Wild* (1743):

> Without considering Newgate as no other than human nature with its mask off, which some very shameless writers have done, a thought which no price should purchase me to entertain, I think we may be excused for suspecting, that the splendid palaces of the great are often no other than Newgate with the mask on.[382]

Granted that, in *Jonathan Wild*, we are presented with a satirical piece which has its focus upon the nature of 'greatness' (Walpole, of course, being the target of the satire), Fielding, nonetheless, with his customary coyness, opens to us the uncomfortable connection between transparency and corruption. The boundary between light and darkness, he is suggesting, is an elusive one. Fielding recognises that the mask of either prison or palace can render opaque those characteristics of human nature so easily assumed to shine in either context. Heaven can be found in hell and vice versa.

Applying this ambiguity to the conversion scene in *Amelia*, we are left wondering, not only about the psychological dimensions of Booth, but the very nature and efficacy of redemption itself. Ultimately, then, if the supreme security of salvation is in doubt,

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[381] *Amelia*, p. ix.
[382] Henry Fielding, *Jonathan Wild*, ed. by David Nokes (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 30.

then we are left with no safe place. *Amelia*, instead of the providential saccharine that both contemporary and modern-day critics have accused Fielding of serving his readers, becomes instead a much more bitter dish, whose ingredients are difficult to swallow. Consequently, it shares all the hallmarks of misplacement – it is the novel of blasphemy.

Returning to the broader issue of the novel's reception, we find that this notion of *Amelia*, as the novel of blasphemy, serves as a means to coming to terms with the less than coherent critical response that the novel has received. The apparently flawed nature of the novel in this misplaced sense, paradoxically exhibits for us its greatest strength, namely its own fragile existence, standing as it does on the edge of existence and non-existence, of reality and unreality. I have founded my argument on the basis of human frailty. That frailty extends to the novel itself. In this respect, Wright's comment that Fielding 'was losing his faith in art' becomes an unwittingly apposite critique, in the sense that one can read such an expression in two ways. The first way, I would suggest, is to regard it as representative of a temptation towards a metaphysics of presence. In other words, Wright is seeking for a way out of the sense of unease with which *Amelia* leaves us. Fielding, he argues, has, in *Amelia*, simply given up.

However, there is another way of reading Wright's comments, and that is to see Fielding as 'losing his faith in art', that is, his faith is actively and positively lost in the art form he is producing. Notice that this is not, as with the Romantic tradition, a losing of faith *to* art. Instead, this is to be regarded as a forging of a work of art *alongside* the risk of faith. This is another way of expressing one of the key themes in my thesis — a parting *with* the ineffable. In this particular case, Fielding is seen, not to *give up* as Wright sees it, but rather to *struggle with* an art form which, at all times, points us to a parting with the ineffable. The critical paradox of *Amelia* is that, despite its claustrophobic atmosphere, it actually breaks free from the determinism within which critics seek to imprison it. The blasphemy of *Amelia* is that it refuses to provide any easy solution for us as to both the nature of the novel form but also, ultimately, the nature of the human condition.

In Jorge Luis Borges' story, *The Theologians*, Aurelian, having caused his fellow-theologian, John of Pannonia to be burned as a heretic, is himself struck by lightning and killed. He finds himself in heaven:

> The end of the story can only be related in metaphors since it takes place
> in the kingdom of heaven, where there is no time. Perhaps it would be
> correct to say that Aurelian spoke with God and that He was so little
> interested in religious differences that He took him for John of Pannonia.
> This, however, would imply a confusion in the divine mind. It is more
> correct to say that in Paradise, Aurelian learned that, for the unfathomable
> divinity, he and John of Pannonia (the orthodox believer and the heretic,
> the abhorrer and the abhorred, the accuser and the accused) formed one
> single person.[383]

It is clear, then, that Fielding exposes, both in his comedic critical awareness and in his own fiction, a sensitivity towards that determinism which literary, theological and historical tradition strives to exert upon the artist. Rather like the merging of the accuser and the accused in Borges' tale, Fielding himself, as we have seen, no stranger to the wrath of the critic, carries out an exercise in illumination and obfuscation. In *Amelia* particularly, he offers us a work which renders opaque, those hitherto clear assessments of what constituted the novel form and yet, paradoxically, in so doing, he sheds light on the misplaced nature of both the work of art and the human condition.

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[383] Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Theologians', in *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 157-158.

Chapter Five

Prudence, Providence and Jurisprudence: Fielding's Moral Misplacement

> There are a Set of Religious, or rather, Moral Writers, who teach that Virtue is the certain Road to Happiness, and Vice to Misery, in this World. A very wholesome and comfortable Doctrine, and to which we have but one Objection, namely, That it is not true.[384]

Walking Away With The Nail

In his 1925 essay, 'Morality and the Novel', D. H. Lawrence evangelically states:

> Philosophy, religion, science, they are all of them busy nailing things down, to get a stable equilibrium. Religion, with all its nailed down One God who says *Thou shalt*, *Thou shan't*, and hammers home every time; philosophy, with its fixed ideas; science with its 'laws': they, all of them, all the time, want to nail us on to some tree or other. But the novel, no. The novel is the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered. Everything is true in its own time, place, circumstance, and untrue out of its own place, time, circumstance. If you try to nail anything down in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail. Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance. When the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection, that is immorality.[385]

What Lawrence is clearly advocating here is a *space* for literature, and particularly the novel, to do what only it can do. The legitimisation of the novel form, for Lawrence, does not lie in its moral acceptability, but in its ability to express life. As a result, deterministic stances, be they founded on religion, science or philosophy, have no place in the creation of what he described in another essay as 'tremulations on the

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[384] *Tom Jones*, XV.i.507.
[385] D.H. Lawrence, 'Morality and the Novel', in *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. by Anthony Beal (London: Heinemann, 1961), p. 110.

ether'.[386] The novel, then, *is* the whole of life, the mystery and its reflection. It defies conventions and breaks down any artificially created divisions.

I have, earlier, sought to recognise, in a way similar to Lawrence, that a space is indeed required for literature including especially the novel. However, as I have consistently noted, whereas Lawrence (and as we saw earlier, the Romantics) would seek to leave the space as a void for art to fill, my claim is that this space can only fulfil the task set for it when it is regarded as a hope-filled space; i.e., already filled with the potentiality that misplacement can bring from both an artistic and a theological perspective.

Nonetheless, it seems appropriate that I should quote Lawrence of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* fame, since Henry Fielding, who found himself courting, albeit less vociferous, controversy with his great work, *Tom Jones* could also fairly be described as a novelist who delights in walking away with the nail. Fielding's artistic self-consciousness allied to his endless store of ironic charm provides us, in *Tom Jones*, with a work which sits well with Lawrence's description of the novel form. In this chapter, then, I shall examine Fielding's subversive ethical vision.

Lawrence stated elsewhere that Fielding was one of the few novelists to attempt to rescue the Old Man (meaning, of course, the scriptural 'Old Adam') from the clutches of those religious autocrats who would seek to remove any reference to the flesh and thus real life.[387] This is most obviously the case when we look at *Tom Jones*. The subject matter – a bastard son is alienated both from his guardian, Squire Allworthy, and Sophia, his one true love and, as a consequence, goes on a series of adventures including several sexual dalliances – proved too much for the likes of Samuel Richardson, who described it as 'a dissolute book'.[388] *Tom Jones* is undoubtedly 'earthy', but it is this very earthiness which, paradoxically in Fielding's hands, exhibits its sublimity. This paradox is most apparent in Fielding's discussions of morality and religion. For the purposes of this chapter, I wish to concentrate on three specific ethical motifs which occur in Fielding's fiction, namely Prudence, Providence

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[386] D.H. Lawrence, 'Why the Novel Matters', in *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 103.
[387] D.H. Lawrence, 'Puritanism and the Arts', in *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 54.
[388] From a letter to J.B. de Freval, in *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. by John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 175.

and the Law. Given Fielding's own background as a magistrate, one can appreciate the significance of an examination of his understanding of the law. Indeed, a number of such studies have already been offered.[389] However, as, I hope is clear by now, the present study does not wish to provide a purely historical analysis but, rather, a means of discerning the deconstructive nature of Fielding's artistic activity. With this background in mind, it is important that we begin with a more fundamental examination of Fielding's ironic use of the terms *Prudence* and *Providence* in order to illustrate his approach to morality or what he describes in his last novel, *Amelia*, as the 'Art of Life'.[390]

Prudence

Martin Battestin recognised long ago the ambivalent nature of the word "prudence" in the hands of Fielding.[391] Even earlier, Hutchens made the point that, in *Tom Jones*, 'the words "prudence", "prudent", and "prudential" are used unfavourably three times to every one time they are used favourably.'[392] The original meaning of this, one of the four cardinal virtues had, by Fielding's day, acquired less wholesome nuances. It had come to mean more than simply the ability to judge between virtuous and vicious actions and had garnered connotations of a sly, political awareness which is self-serving rather than selfless. So we find the chief villain of *Tom Jones*, Blifil, exhibiting those particularly detestable aspects of modern prudence in the way he ingratiates himself into the affections of the more traditionally prudent, yet clearly unworldly, Allworthy.

And yet Fielding is well aware of the danger of simplifying moral behaviour. That is one of the reasons, I believe, that he so ridiculed Richardson's *Pamela* with his own *Shamela*. For Fielding, Pamela does not learn prudence; she is in his mind therefore, someone who remains shallow. He would rather she exhibited the kind of sleekit nature or, as he describes it, 'Vartue', to be found in his parody of the Richardson

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[389] See, for example, Lance Bertelsen, *Henry Fielding at Work: magistrate, businessman, writer* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2000).
[390] *Amelia*, 1.2.14.
[391] Martin C. Battestin, *The Providence of Wit* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 166-192.
[392] Eleanor, N. Hutchens, *Irony in Tom Jones* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1965), p. 101.

heroine. This would, at least, introduce us to a human being – which of course is the specific goal he sets himself in *Tom Jones*.

Indeed, it is this learning the value of prudence which serves as the goal that Fielding sets Tom in his journey. Fielding knows that prudence, itself as well as Tom, is subject to misuse and confusion and, in the novel, this ambivalence is stretched to its limits. This can lead to the potential for what I describe as a moral misreading of the text. A good example of this is found in the critical passage in which, Battestin believes, Tom finally recognises the error of his ways – the apparent discovery that he has committed incest. I would suggest, on the contrary, that even here at the nadir of Tom's exile, Fielding is playing with perceptions of morality:

> '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 of my own Folly and Vice. What thou hast told me, *Partridge*, hath almost deprived me of my Senses. And was Mrs *Waters* then — But why do I ask? for thou must certainly know her. — If thou hast any Affection for me; nay if thou hast any Pity, let me beseech you to fetch this miserable Woman back again to me. O good Heavens! Incest — with a Mother!'[393]

Here, Battestin suggests, is the place where Tom finally grows up and assumes responsibility. It is not Fortune that is to blame but himself. As Battestin puts it, 'Here is at once the climax and the resolution of the theme of *prudentia* in the novel.'[394] Though I understand why Battestin would wish to come to this conclusion, he seems to have fallen into the trap that Lawrence believes awaits all ideological critics – the desire to pin down the text. As a result, rather ironically, Battestin appears to have missed the joke at the end of the last passage. Tom loudly wails, 'Incest — with a Mother!' Here, Fielding is not, as Battestin seems to think, simply spelling out what Tom thinks he has done, thereby pointing to the full horror of his situation. Nor is Boucé correct when, in his analysis, he states:

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[393] *Tom Jones*, XVIII.ii.597.
[394] Martin Battestin, *The Providence Of Wit*, p. 177.

> The harrowing experience of narrowly avoided incest is Fielding's method
> of forcing Tom to shed the grossest lusts of the flesh, and grasp in true
> Platonic fashion the *idea* of love beyond its worldly image.[395]

Rather, the reality Fielding wishes us to be aware of is that incest is incest is incest. Whether it is with a mother is not the issue. Tom's cry of dereliction, as Alter has noted,[396] becomes the joke that bursts the melodramatic nature of the whole scene, which Fielding, himself, describes in the chapter heading with his tongue firmly in his cheek as 'a very tragical Incident'. This heading, like so many others in *Tom Jones*, is clearly another joke as it most likely refers back to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the tragedy that, earlier in the story, Tom and his eccentric companion, Partridge, had attended at the Drury Lane Theatre. This comic connection is further enhanced by an awareness of the parallel moral catastrophe of 'incest' committed between Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, and Gertrude, Hamlet's mother.

Battestin has, in my view, misread the passage, and has seen what appears to be a moral judgement against Tom. As a result, he has weakened the comedic effect, and thereby the power of the narrative in illustrating the ridiculous nature of the human condition. Fielding is by no means belittling the seriousness of incest, but he is, as the overseer of his world, tipping the wink to us that even though Providence may have failed, he has not. Thus, at this most critical point in the novel, the point of moral realisation is never a final destination, but a means to further exploration. Fielding, who saw the sole purpose of *Tom Jones* as a means to exhibiting HUMAN NATURE, knows that, in the end, human nature defies final analysis. It is through comedy that he is not only able to amuse us but to subvert those theological and moral constraints under whose artificial yoke humanity cannot flourish. His desire in his earlier work, *Joseph Andrews*, was to witness to the sublime by means of the ludicrous.[397] He is, as a result, never prepared to close off any potential comedic avenue, regardless of the sacredness of the subject matter.

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[395] Paul-Gabriel Boucé, 'Sex, amours and love in *Tom Jones'*, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 228, (1984), 25-38 (p. 37).
[396] Alter, *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel*, p. 18.
[397] *Joseph Andrews*, p. 4.

We are left, then, with the question: Is there a moral purpose to Fielding's fiction at all? There are those who would answer in the affirmative. Take, for example, Arnold Kettle who argues that Fielding is confident that the problems which confront society can be ameliorated by 'humane feeling and right reason'.[398] Can this truly be so? Can we even agree with Michael Irwin when he suggests, 'By the time Fielding came to write, an ethical intention was essential to any serious writer and open exhortation was commonplace.'?[399] Irwin is suggesting that Fielding merely falls into line with the expected ethical dimension to fiction that Richardson and Defoe before him had developed. But clearly, Fielding does not follow this line. If he did, would he have received such vitriol from Richardson or Johnson?

In a desire to rehabilitate Fielding, Henry Knight Miller attempts to come to terms with Fielding's portrayal of Tom by arguing, 'Impractical, immature, adolescent, even absurd, such moral innocence has forever been felt as the rejuvenating impulse without which society would stagnate and die.'[400] Such grand analysis, though well-intentioned and, to a degree, cogent, is precisely the kind of deterministic thinking that Fielding, the novelist, would eschew. Miller does recognise, though, that Fielding's innocence has an edge to it. It confronts corruption and can be overtaken by it. In Miller's words, 'Innocence implies its opposite.'[401]

> Despite, or perhaps because of, Fielding's full sceptical recognition that fallen man – take him all in all – is an ambiguous being, not very strongly deserving of the love of his equally dubious fellows…the persistent emphasis of *Tom Jones* is upon love, the need for love, the necessity of love, both as a freely offered gift and as a jewel worth striving for.[402]

Damrosch Jr. succinctly offers his own view of the subtle range of Fielding's ethical approach:

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[398] Arnold Kettle*, 'Tom Jones'*, in *Fielding: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Ronald Paulson, p. 84.
[399] Michael Irwin, *Fielding, The Tentative Realist* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 10.
[400] Henry Knight Miller, 'The 'Digressive' Tales in Fielding's *Tom Jones* and the Perspective of Romance', *Philological Quarterly*, 54 (1975), 258-74 (p. 267).
[401] Ibid., p. 267.
[402] Ibid., p. 269.

> In Richardson's world you are either defiled or pure. In Fielding's world there are a few great sinners, not many saints, and a wide range of mortals in between.[403]

The point is that Fielding's comic fiction is, indeed, ethically subversive. Such subversion is actively found in the nature of the novel itself. To this end, as Hauerwas has made clear, the new narrative medium of which Fielding was, of course, a pioneer, becomes a crucible of lived human experience, which questions any particular moral code while, at the same time as we experience the text, engenders a morality of its own:

> Thus the very act of reading of the novel is a moral training. By forcing our eyes from one word to the next, one sentence to the next, one paragraph to the next, we are stretched through a narrative world that gives us the skills to make something of our own lives. To make something of our own lives requires us being able to locate our own story in an unfolding narrative so that we can go on […] Novels are the means, though not the only means, to be sure, that we have to attain the skills of locating and telling our individual stories, not as instances of some grand schemes, but as uniquely ours.[404]

What Hauerwas appears to be promoting in the above is that the narrative world becomes a catalyst for our own lived experience. In this respect, the morality (or immorality for that matter) found in a work of fiction is real to the extent that it can become a training ground for our own individual moral development. And this moral reality is not located in some metanarrative but in the very narrative that is placed before us. The ethical component is grounded in the text itself and must be enfleshed by the reader. To this extent, as I have already indicated earlier in this study, the novel has a deeply sacramental nature. It is in the earthiness of the text that we encounter for ourselves a moral aesthetic.

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[403] Leopold Damrosch Jr., *God's Plot and Man's Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 270.
[404] Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 56.

The consequence of this is that morality itself, as we find it in the novel, is misplaced. It is both fictive and, as Hauerwas has pointed out, deeply real. It lies in the text, but it moves beyond the text into the lived experience of the reader.

All of the above finds contemporary resonance when Fielding himself argues in his 'An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men':

> Good nature is that benevolent and amiable temper of mind, which disposes us to feel the misfortunes, and enjoy the happiness of others; and, consequently, pushes us on to promote the latter, and prevent the former; and that without any abstract contemplation on the beauty of virtue, and without the allurements or terrors of religion.[405]

Once again, Fielding seeks to distance the experience of virtue from any fixed metaphysical point and root it in the experience of the individual. This has led Woodman to suggest that 'the whole thrust of Fielding's work is obviously towards ignoring the niceties of doctrine and faith and concentrating on the broad dimension of actively expressed love for one's neighbour'.[406] Following this, and more specifically, Ribble has argued that, for Fielding, 'prudence is not cleverness that happens to be applied to a good end, but a feeling for the end, a feeling for the whole'.[407] Richard Holloway's wry comment that 'prudence wins, as it often does in the religious calculus',[408] is one with which Fielding would have some sympathy. Indeed, given his last comment, above, regarding virtue and religion, one cannot help harbouring the suspicion that, in his fiction, Fielding takes every opportunity to, in my terminology, misplace those ethical or theological terms which, in his day, were

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[405] Henry Fielding, 'An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men', in *Miscellanies* Vol. I, ed. by Henry Knight Miller, p. 158. There is some debate as to the extent to which Fielding owes his understanding of 'Good Nature' to Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713). Martin Battestin seeks to distance Fielding from Shaftesbury's deistic tendencies, but K. G. Simpson argues that Shaftesbury should be placed more centre-stage in establishing Fielding's moral compass. Martin Battestin, *A Henry Fielding Companion* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 2000), pp. 132-133; K. G. Simpson, *Henry Fielding: Justice Observed* (London: Vision and Barnes & Noble, 1985) pp. 56-74.
[406] Thomas Woodman, '*Tom Jones* and Christian Comedy', in *Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700-2000*, p. 61.
[407] Frederick G. Ribble, 'Aristotle and the "Prudence" Theme of *Tom Jones*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Autumn, 1981), 26-47 (p. 46).
[408] Richard Holloway, *How to Read: The Bible* (London: Granta Books, 2006), p. 96.

viewed as so secure that clerics and philosophers, like Thwackum and Square, could never discuss without coming to blows.

Providence

> "A man," the Rabbi had said, "a poor man, found a fine horse upon the road. 'How fortunate you are,' his friend said. 'Well,' the man said, 'well, you never know.' His son took the horse out to ride, and was thrown, and was maimed. 'How misfortunate you are,' the friend said, and the man said 'Well, you never know.' But the next day the recruiting officers came round, to press the Jewish boys. Where they would go to the Czar's army to serve twenty-five years. But the man's son was maimed, and so he was spared. 'How fortunate you are,' his friend said, and the man…"[409]

A matter of equal importance to many of the early writers of fiction was that of Providence. As I have already noted, in an age where human creativity in both the arts and sciences was expanding along with the geographical boundaries of the known world, the sense of a controlling benevolence was either looked to as a blessed succour for those bewildered in this fast-changing world, or seriously questioned by those who saw humanity's future steering its own course.

In writing *Robinson Crusoe*, to offer an introductory example, Daniel Defoe desired to 'justify and honour the Wisdom of Providence'.[410] Such bold religious goals are tempered by Defoe's clear understanding of where he believes the root of true suffering lies. G.A. Starr summarizes the position well when he states: 'For Defoe, the heart of darkness is man's handiwork, not nature's; the worst disasters have humans not only as victims but also as perpetrators.'[411]

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[409] David Mamet, *The Old Religion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 163.
[410] Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel, 2nd edn. (New York & London: Norton & Co., 1994), p. 3.
[411] G.A. Starr, 'Defoe and Disasters', in *Dreadful Visitations: Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Alessa Johns (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 45.

Defoe had already written about disaster, some years before *Robinson Crusoe* was published. His work, *The Storm* (1704) describes the events surrounding a natural disaster that struck Britain on 26/27 November 1703 in which around 8,000 people lost their lives. In this work, Defoe challenges those who would refuse to accept the providence of God in the whole sorry episode. Defoe may have had the storm in mind when he writes of that which occurred off the Yarmouth coast in *Robinson Crusoe*.[412] Crusoe's response to disaster in all its forms becomes a significant theme in the book and, as a consequence, ought to impact upon our attempts to interpret the work.

It is, of course, a truism to state that 'the problem of pain', as C.S. Lewis encapsulated it, is by no means a new human dilemma. Defoe's contemporaries knew only too well the transitory nature of the human condition. The question of providence in the face of suffering was not a frivolous one.[413] There was a powerful connection between the apparent arbitrary nature of the material world and a divine benevolence lying somewhere in the background. Rogers has written: 'In 1719 no living Englishman (or woman) could have escaped the power of the religious word; it was the stuff of his culture.'[414] Defoe was no different and I suggest that in *Robinson Crusoe* we find a conscious, though obviously imperfect attempt to express such enduring questions of existence. Crusoe's 'dismal island' forms an isolated Eden where, ultimately, he not only dominates the land but also learns to discipline his soul, which, as Halewood puts it, 'becomes his antagonist'.[415]

Overall, Crusoe links his experience of suffering with his spiritual waywardness. His conversion, though in some senses overly stylised, can also be regarded as a significant staging post on his journey to reconcile that conundrum of providence in the face of evil. Robinson sums up his experience thus:

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[412] Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. by Michael Shinagel (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), pp.10-11.

[413] Roy Porter informs us that, in the early eighteenth century, 'maybe a fifth of all babies died in their first year; perhaps one in three died – of gastro-enteric disorders and fevers – before the age of five'. Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 13.

[414] Pat Rogers, *Robinson Crusoe* (George Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 58.

[415] William H. Halewood, 'Religion and Invention in *Robinson Crusoe*', *Essays in Criticism* 14 (1964), 339-351 (p. 346).

In a word, as my Life was a Life of Sorrow, one way, so it was a Life of Mercy, another; and I wanted nothing to make it a Life of Comfort, but to be able to make my Sense of God's Goodness to me, and care over me in this Condition.[416]

A helpful contrast with Defoe's work, and one that can lead us to Fielding's own presentation of Providence, can be found in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*. Here, Coetzee dispenses with the tract-like narrative which seeks to justify every act as somehow or other part of God's design. Susan Barton, the voice of the novel is a woman stranded on the same island as Cruso and Friday. She discovers that Friday has, at some time, had his tongue removed and wonders at the circumstances of such a horrible fate:

"It's a terrible story," I said. A silence fell. Friday took up out utensils and retired into the darkness. Where is the justice in it? First a slave and now a castaway too. Robbed of his childhood and consigned to a life of silence. Was Providence sleeping?"

"If Providence were to watch over all of us," said Cruso, "who would be left to pick the cotton and cut the sugar-cane? For the business of the world to prosper, Providence must sometimes wake and sometimes sleep, as lower creatures do." He saw I shook my head, so went on. "You think I mock Providence. But perhaps it is the doing of Providence that Friday finds himself on an island under a lenient master, rather than in Brazil, under the planter's lash, or in Africa, where the forests teem with cannibals. Perhaps it is for the best, though we do not see it so, that he should be here, and that I should be here, and now that you should be here."[417]

Defoe's repentant and God-fearing Crusoe is here replaced with Coetzee's more ambivalent (and interesting) Cruso who, instead of seeing his situation as an ordeal to be overcome has been, instead, overtaken by the island he now cannot be separated from and live. This Cruso is more prepared than his illustrious fictional predecessor to accept the possibility that life is infused with frailty and ambiguity; in the one breath

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[416] Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 132.
[417] J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 23-24.

he can state that Providence is asleep, in the next Providence is wide awake and intervening in the lives of all three protagonists. It is here, I suggest, that Coetzee offers us an example of Providence being misplaced. The word is being used in such a way as to leave open the possibility of a broader field of meaning. We are led to the space where literature and theology can fruitfully engage without prejudice. This misplacement, I believe, is the strategy Fielding skilfully directs at the word Providence in his own work.

An example from *Tom Jones* may aid us here. In the third chapter of Book 18, Allworthy discovers that Tom is innocent of profligacy and has instead been robbed of the £500 he had received on his expulsion from Allworthy. Fielding introduces the discovery thus:

> Here an Accident happened of a very extraordinary kind; one indeed of those strange chances, whence very good and grave Men have concluded that Providence interposes in the Discovery of the most secret Villainy, in order to caution Men from quitting the Paths of Honesty, however warily they tread in those of Vice.[418]

Here the two ideas of Prudence and Providence are virtually conflated and both are equally misplaced. At the outset, Fielding baldly uses the word 'Accident' to deflate the pretensions of those who would wish to impose supernatural means upon the natural activity of men. He uses the words 'extraordinary', 'strange' and 'chance' to drive home the ordinariness of what has occurred. The equation of 'good' with 'grave' is illustrative of Fielding's distaste for that theology which is too deterministic and thus, for him, dead. He 'walks away with the nail' further in his assessment of the apparent achievement of Providence. It is to 'caution Men from quitting the Paths of Honesty, however warily they tread in those of Vice'. In other words Providence and Prudence (the act of 'warily treading') as mere theological or ethical notions have little power to alter the hearts of those minded toward evil. What counts is the actual behaviour of the individual under specific circumstances. How the individual travels in life is, for Fielding, more significance than the principles he holds.

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[418] *Tom Jones,* XVIII.iii.600.

It is this travelling that Tom is engaged in. He leaves Allworthy's 'Eden' under difficult circumstances and his journey becomes a movement from innocence to experience – a departure from Paradise to encounter the world. It is in this journey, in other words, where Tom himself becomes the embodiment of misplacement. Tom is, at the hands of Fielding, providentially misplaced both geographically and socially. However, the most significant providential misplacement is found at the level of his own character.

Contrary to many critics of *Tom Jones*, I believe Fielding's intention is to present us with Tom (and thereby Human Nature) in all his complexity.[419] This complexity is not developed in the same manner as, for example, Richardson, who, even if he did not realise it, was, in Pamela and, more particularly, Clarissa, presenting to us vital psychological portraits. Fielding, on the other hand, uses his skill as a comic director to guide us to the conclusion that Tom is more than Johnson or Richardson assumed him to be.

The development of character, for Fielding, thus becomes a misplaced providential activity. This understanding of providence has little or nothing to do with the doctrine that the individual has little or no control over his or her own destiny. Rather, it entails the broader sense that all lived experience is, to a degree, 'guided' by lights that are both benign and malevolent. In other words, the human experience of frailty becomes the template upon which individual character is shaped. For Fielding, the recognition of this fact is the means by which affectation and hypocrisy are avoided.

Such a misplaced providence chimes very well with Vattimo's notion of a 'weakening of being', discussed in Chapter 1. For the development of character in the novel is, to a large degree a development of ontology. The 'being' of character and the 'character' of being are the essence of the providential act in a work of fiction. It is this providential act that Fielding is most acutely aware of, and it is such awareness that leads him to subvert the very notion of providence itself.

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[419] For example, Watt argues that, effectively, Fielding's characters are sacrificed on the altar of plot. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, pp. 260-89.

Having offered this broad assessment, we must recognise that Fielding does, however, on occasion, become more explicit regarding his mode of characterisation:

> Our modern Authors of Comedy have fallen almost universally into the Error here hinted at: Their Heroes generally are notorious Rogues, and their Heroines abandoned Jades, during the first four Acts; but in the fifth, the former become very worthy Gentlemen, and the latter, Women of Virtue and Discretion.[420]

For a character to 'work' in fiction, he or she must not defy the potential for his or her future to be undermined. Fielding's subversive approach to prudence and providence in the character of Tom, implies a sincere desire to reckon with him as a fragile individual. Ironically, this sincere desire is best put into execution by the use of comedy. So we find Fielding laughing at both providence and prudence as he displays the threat that lies over his hero:

> WHEN a comic writer hath made his principal characters as happy as he can, or when a tragic writer hath brought them to the highest pitch of human misery, they both conclude their business to be done, and that their work is come to a period.
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> […] But to bring our favourites out of their present anguish and distress, and to land them at last on the shore of happiness, seems a much harder task; a task indeed so hard that we do not undertake to execute it. In regard to Sophia, it is more than probable that we shall somewhere or other provide a good husband for her in the end—either Blifil, or my lord, or somebody else; but as to poor Jones, such are the calamities in which he is at present involved, owing to his imprudence, by which if a man doth not become felon to the world, he is at least a *felo de se;* so destitute is he now of friends, and so persecuted by enemies, that we almost despair of bringing him to any good; and if our reader delights in seeing executions, I think he ought not to lose any time in taking a first row at Tyburn.

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[420] *Tom Jones*, VIII.i.262.

This I faithfully promise, that, notwithstanding any affection which we may be supposed to have for this rogue, whom we have unfortunately made our heroe, we will lend him none of that supernatural assistance with which we are entrusted, upon condition that we use it only on very important occasions. If he doth not therefore find some natural means of fairly extricating himself from all his distresses, we will do no violence to the truth and dignity of history for his sake; for we had rather relate that he was hanged at Tyburn (which may very probably be the case) than forfeit our integrity, or shock the faith of our reader.[421]

Such irony is borne out of Fielding's serious understanding of the operational frailties surrounding notions such as Providence. As Rosengarten puts it:

Fielding believed that he lived in the theatre, if not of God's glory, then of God's broadly encompassing activity. He was less certain, however, about the degree to which confidence in God's broad embrace of the world could rest firmly on the events of daily life.[422]

Rawson is surely correct when he states: 'If Richardson makes his novel look like life, Fielding is making life look like one of his novels.'[423] This comment, designed as it is to point simply to Fielding's overall authorial control of his creation, actually gets to the heart of the matter in a way that Rawson may not have envisaged. The novelist does create a real world in his fiction. What that world achieves is as real as any achievement in the so-called 'real' world. Another way of describing this achievement is misplacement.

Fielding is clear that, in the novel, anything approaching realism has to avoid the fantastic but, at the same time, cannot ignore the equally pressing reality of the artistic pulse to drive forward the creation. In other words, he is more than aware of the creative tension that the novel form, by its very existence, cannot help but produce. It is this creative tension allied to Fielding's ironic mastery that inevitably stretches the

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[421] *Tom Jones*, XVII.i.569.

[422] Richard A. Rosengarten, *Henry Fielding and the Narration of Providence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 19.

[423] Rawson, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress*, p. 61.

boundaries of language at all levels, and particularly, as we have seen, at those 'sacred' and 'fixed' levels of theology and morality.

Jurisprudence

"I would be loathe to speak ill of any man behind his back, but I believe the gentleman is an attorney."

Samuel Johnson[424]

Compared with actions words have the disadvantage of carrying within themselves the seeds of judgements.[425]

Having been at pains to recognise in this study that I wish to avoid a purely socio-historical approach to Fielding and his work, at this stage one cannot avoid asking how the legal profession was generally regarded in the eighteenth century, not least because of Fielding's own professional engagement as a magistrate.

The place of the law in the eighteenth century was an ever-expanding though, paradoxically, increasingly ambivalent one. As Porter makes clear, the general perception of English Law as a means to promote individual liberty remained unbowed.[426] But Leemings has suggested that it was precisely because of this perceived ideal that many were led to criticize the current legal status quo.[427] Law-making in general, by the middle of the period, had become a feverish activity. This, allied to the plethora of local legislation demanded by the pressure of interest groups or even individuals, inevitably led to a more opaque and less readily accessible judicial system.[428] It is within this morass that the attorney was seen to do his work. It

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[424] James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. by John Canning (London: Guild Publishing, 1991), p. 130.
[425] Ivan Klíma, *Judge on Trial*, trans. by A. G. Brain (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 92.
[426] Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 133.
[427] David Leemings, *Professors of the Law: Barristers and English Legal Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 10.
[428] Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People England 1723-83* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 298-9.

comes as no surprise, then, to discover that the lawyer was not universally adored. This antipathy toward the lawyer was not, however, simply because of the legal mire from which he plied his trade. Many people sincerely believed that those who operated from the morass could not fail to be contaminated by it. Though the system was ostensibly designed to provide security for all, it was clear that the propertied stood more of a chance in litigation. Through the expansion of legal proceedings, which inevitably involved property rights of all kinds, the lawyer came to be seen as, not only a champion of the wealthy, but also to be criticized by those he aimed to serve. Harding makes the point that an Act of 1732 disqualified from the office of justice attorneys, solicitors and anyone not possessing an estate worth £100 a year.[429] Clearly this emphasised the vertical, paternalistic relationship played out particularly in Fielding's novels, between the magistrate and his 'clientele'. As I shall show, however, the cosy relationship envisaged in the rural communities did not reflect the greater difficulties faced by those called to serve justice in the less clearly defined metropolitan situations.

Having briefly outlined the historical milieu can we, at this point, apply a deconstructive approach to Fielding's assessment of the law? Is it possible to see, in the way he presents the law in his fiction, a means to subvert the very stability the law is meant to provide? As we shall see, there is, in Fielding, a complete recognition of the potential weaknesses of individuals charged with a duty of care under the rule of law. Can this ambivalence be extended to, not only the practice of law, but to the law in and of itself? Can we discern in his fiction the tension that exists in presenting any rule of law purely on the basis of a moral code?

In his essay, 'The Law Wishes To Have A Formal Existence', Stanley Fish offers two points that are pertinent to our study here. The first of these is the importance of a morally neutral legal code; the second, the equally significant recognition that the exercise of law is itself a narrative activity. Amplifying the first of these points, Fish argues that experience shows us, not only that there are competing moralities, but that those very different moralities change over time. The result is obvious: 'In short,

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[429] Alan Harding, *A Social History of English Law* (London: Penguin, 1966), pp. 267-8. Julian Hoppit however, sets the monetary requirement higher at £200. See his, *A Land of Liberty? England 1689-1727* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 467.

many moralities would make many laws, and the law would lack its most saliently desirable properties, generality and stability.'[430] Morality, in this regard, is not a boon but a burden.

Fielding, a magistrate himself, is acutely aware of the risk of moral interest in the exercise of the law and does not shrink from the negative light within which his profession found itself. Indeed, as with most of his characters, he appears to delight in displaying in his attorneys, magistrates and justices those very weaknesses which had become the bane of so many people's lives. We become particularly aware of the moral bias that infects so much of the decision-making process. This is seen very clearly in *Joseph Andrews* where the law has an important place throughout. In relating her "History of Leonora", Parson Adams' companion in the coach speaks of the Quarter Sessions, (courts which lasted two or three days, held to try small offences):

> 'It seems, it is usual for the young Gentlemen of the Bar to repair to these Sessions, not so much for the sake of Profit, as to shew their Parts and learn the Law of the Justices of the Peace: for which purpose one of the wisest and gravest of all the Justices is appointed Speaker or Chairman, as they modestly call it, and he reads them a Lecture, and instructs them in the true Knowledge of the Law.'
> 'You are here guilty of a little Mistake,' says *Adams*, 'which if you please I will correct; I have attended at one of these Quarter Sessions, where I have observed the Counsel taught the Justices, instead of learning any thing of them.'[431]

The ignorance of the justices is only comparable to their weakness for corruption, as is evidenced in the character of the aptly named Justice Frolick, whose extreme treatment of the poor is only tempered by the intervention of the local gentry.[432] In *Tom Jones*, it is Squire Western acting as a country justice, who finds himself on the

[430] Stanley Fish, 'The Law Wishes To Have A Formal Existence', in *The Stanley Fish Reader*, ed. by H. Aram Veeser (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 167.
[431] *Joseph Andrews*, II.4.134.
[432] *Joseph Andrews*, IV.5.286.

receiving end of Fielding's wit. Tempted, on the instruction of his aggrieved sister, to have Mrs Honour despatched to Bridewell, he is cautioned by his Clerk thus:

> But luckily the Clerk had a Qualification, which no Clerk to a Justice of Peace ought ever to be without, namely, some Understanding in the Law of this Realm. He therefore whispered in the Ear of the Justice, that he would exceed his Authority by committing the Girl to *Bridewell*, as there had been no Attempt to break the Peace; 'for I am afraid, Sir,' says he, 'you cannot legally commit any one to *Bridewell* only for Ill-breeding.'[433]

Even the saintly Allworthy 'whose natural Love of Justice, joined to the Coolness of Temper, made him always a most Patient Magistrate',[434] is given a subtle censure throughout the work, simply because of his blindness to the ways of the world and to the variances of human nature. His most blatant mistake, of course, is that over Tom, himself, and this continuing lack of judgement forms a major theme in the presentation of what does and does not constitute a truly criminal act in the mind of Fielding.

It is, however, the attorney who feels the full force of Fielding's wrath. He points to the exorbitant and apparently random nature of legal costs in a footnote:

> This is a Fact which I knew happen to a poor Clergyman in Dorsetshire, by the Villainy of an Attorney, who not content with the exorbitant Costs to which the poor Man was put by a single Action, brought afterwards another Action on the Judgement as it was called. A Method frequently used to oppress the Poor, and bring Money into the pockets of Attorneys, to the great Scandal of the Law, the Nation, of Christianity, and even of Human Nature itself.[435]

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[433] *Tom Jones*, VII.ix.232.
[434] *Tom Jones*, II.vi.67.
[435] *Tom Jones*, XVIII.vi.610.

The most obvious example of this scheming type is Lawyer Dowling in *Tom Jones*. His complicity with the schemes of Blifil, who, as I have noted, is the clearest personification of evil in the novel, speaks volumes as to Fielding's thoughts regarding the self-serving approach of members of the legal profession. Possibly the ultimate accusation is offered by Fielding at the point where we last hear of the evil Blifil. Here we find him conspiring with none other than an attorney to buy a seat in Parliament.[436]

What we witness in these passages is, not so much the censure of moral degradation itself, but the misplacement of the law by the very presence of an amoral code. The law gains its status as law by the absence of morality. Fish makes the point that 'if one can infer directly from one's moral obligation in a situation to one's legal obligation, there is no work for the legal system to do'.[437] Fielding appears to recognise this in his fiction and it forms the basis of the comic misplacement of the stability the law is meant to provide.

Fish's second point holds even more force for this study insofar as it recognises the interpretative or, more accurately, narrative nature of the juridical process. He describes the law as 'a discourse continually telling two stories, one of which is denying that the other is being told at all'.[438] That we find Fielding placing the activity of the law within the context of a story, serves to enhance Fish's point. The law as narrative within narrative reveals an inherent instability which serves, not only as a focus for comedy, but as a serious question mark upon the security of the decision-making process. The comic misplacement that Fielding exercises in his fiction points to the impossibility of complete justice, and the fact that any judicial activity has, at all times, to confront fragile individuals who reveal their equally fragile idiosyncratic narratives.

Such comic misplacement, if it does not have any moral root, clearly has a theological one. In his important study, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority',

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[436] *Tom Jones*, XVIII.xiii.639.
[437] Veeser, *The Stanley Fish Reader*, p. 167.
[438] Ibid., p. 200.

Derrida hints at the transcendent nature of this thing called law. Calling on Kierkegaard, Derrida states:

> The instant of decision is a madness… This is particularly true of the instant of the just decision that must rend time and defy dialectics. It is a madness. Even if time and prudence, the patience of knowledge and the mastery of conditions were hypothetically unlimited, the decision would be structurally finite, however late it came, decision of urgency and precipitation, acting in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule. Not of the absence of rules and knowledge but of a reinstitution of rules which by definition is not preceded by any knowledge or by any guarantee as such.[439]

Derrida's dramatic point is that, in the moment of decision, there is both a conserving and a destroying of the law. Each decision is made uniquely and, as such, cannot rest on previous judgements, and, as a result, we come to the conclusion that the very act of deciding is never truly made in a free and responsible manner *in the present*. We are faced here with the dilemma of undecidability. As Derrida puts it:

> A decision that did not go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process.[440]

Expanding upon this undecidability, Derrida points to the ambivalent position of the individual before such a law. If the judicial process is beset by undecidability, in what sense can an individual truly find themselves before the law? Derrida's answer is to present us with the paradox of the transcendent immanence of the law. The law is, in his terms, always 'to come' (*avenir)*, it is never completely established and, to this degree, the individual can never be truly in contact with it. There must be a constant presenting before the law which, in its turn, is constantly interpreted. The law and the individual thus find themselves misplaced in order that justice may be carried out.

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[439] Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority', *Cardozo Law Review* 11 921-1045, (p. 967).
[440] Ibid., p. 963.

Derrida, in his attempt to establish the transcendent nature of the law, quotes Montaigne's words: 'Even our law, it is said, has legitimate fictions on which it founds the truth of justice.'[441] This, of course, has resonance with the remarks that Fish has made above regarding the narrative nature of the law.

How then, given the above, are we to assess how Fielding presents the individual before the law? We recognise at once, of course, that criminality of one sort or another lies at the heart of his major works of fiction. *Jonathan Wild*, as well as an ironic treatise on 'true greatness', also serves as an extended, comical study of the criminal/political mind. Joseph Andrews, along with Fanny and Parson Adams, is brought before the justice in his particular adventure, while Tom Jones is taken for a thief, and is generally considered a wayward soul. In *Amelia*, the threat of the court and the debtor's prison looms large.

Fielding's novels thus entail an inquisitorial element. His purpose to present human nature can, in this respect, be restated as an investigation-in-narrative into the motivation and judgement of the characters in question. For, indeed, the characters are in question. In their very creation they are being placed before the judgement seat. It is important to recognise that the place of the individual before the law is not merely a means to either reflect the historical situation (for example the notorious debtor's prison in *Amelia*), or to merely increase the tension in typically comic fashion towards an ultimate release and resolution. Both of these more obvious factors do, of course, inhere in the works of Fielding, however, it would be missing a further key element if we were to avoid the misplacement of the individual before the law, that is, the putting into question of the very character Fielding has created for us. The judgement is not only part of the narrative; it reflects the deeper reality that judgement is the narrative by which we find ourselves misplaced before the law.

The putting into question of character, paradoxically, removes from us the temptation or obligation to judge. If character finds itself misplaced and under judgement, then there can be no place for a judgemental attitude. Through narrative, then, not only is the potential injustice of the law exposed, its very ontological nature is thus exploded.

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[441] Ibid., p. 939.

Returning to the dangerous story in John's Gospel of the woman caught in adultery mentioned in my first chapter, we can see that, in the narrative, both the accused and those bringing judgement find themselves misplaced before the law. There is a judgement here, but not the judgement those who bring the woman were expecting, or possibly even hoping for. Those bringing the charge find themselves under judgement and the accused is pardoned. Moreover, from this story, the law itself is misplaced insofar as one assumes that the woman, for all the contrivances of her accusers, had a case to answer (indicated by Jesus's words 'Go and *sin* no more'). The law here is misplaced in that it is rendered impotent in the face of divine justice. It is just such juridical misplacement that I believe Fielding offers us in his fiction. And, it is this juridical misplacement which serves as a response to the tension that exists between Fielding the magistrate and Fielding the novelist.[442] Let us now see how this is worked out practically in Fielding's fiction.

Martin Battestin has argued that the thematic motif of *Joseph Andrews* is the doctrine of charity.[443] It is this notion of charity, he suggests, which governs Fielding's overall approach to the criminal and his prosecution. Such good-natured benevolence does not imply any overtly liberal approach toward the treatment of the wrongdoer. One need only examine Fielding's own experience to see that one could not in any sense call him 'soft on crime'. He was known on occasion to keep his court open all night to deal with exceptional numbers of miscreants.[444] His *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1751) left the reader in no doubt as to both the reasons for criminal activity and Fielding's own Whig sensibilities. The increasing wealth brought into London, he believed, removed the sense of responsibility from all layers of society, inviting those of lower station to dare to assume to a higher one: 'Each rank in society is now emulating in expensive pleasures the next rank above.'[445] This reckless aspiration, he argued, led to idleness and inevitably vice, be that gambling or gin-drinking. Recognising the paternalistic nature of his approach, it seems, however,

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[442] Ian A. Bell, *Henry Fielding: Authorship and Authority* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 226.

[443] Martin Battestin, *The Moral Basis of Fielding's Art* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 94.

[444] Wilbur L. Cross, *The History of Henry Fielding*, 3 Vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918), Vol. 2, pp. 228f. This said, his charitable nature was in evidence when dealing with the young and with the aged and infirm.

[445] Henry Fielding, *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers*, ed. by Marvin Zirker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 77ff.

that the key expression in Fielding's legal armoury was the recognition of responsibility.[446]

This key term allied to charity is played out dramatically, as I have shown, in *Joseph Andrews* with a reworking of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.[447] It is worth noting at the outset that the original story was, itself, prompted by a question from a lawyer: 'Who is my neighbour?'[448] Following his own road to Jericho experience with the bandits, the naked Joseph is grudgingly rescued by passengers on a passing coach. The notion of responsibility is ironically sounded, once again, by a travelling lawyer who argues that to pick up the helpless Joseph would, if Joseph later died, leave him and his fellow passengers culpable of murder. The parallel notion of charity is, however voiced by none of the well-to-do passengers but by the soon to be transported postillion, who offers his great coat. That the whole company is subsequently robbed by the same bandits emphasises the value of recognising the needs of others as one's own and that, to act accordingly, constitutes the good-natured individual. Mercy and justice are bound together as are charity and responsibility. For Fielding, here, it is not the crime which is the issue but how one responds to it.

Similarly, in *Tom Jones*, crime is presented in a rather stilted form in order to preserve the intricacy of the plot. So Irwin argues, 'What he [Fielding] regarded as vices could be adequately represented by the 'two-dimensional' figures of the tradition of the humours, but the 'good' he preached was an everyday charity and sympathy which was not so glibly personified.'[449] In other words, Fielding is more interested in the way so called 'good' characters behave in situations of difficulty. *Tom Jones*, though not exactly a didactic novel, does have the explicitly confessed goal of sharing Fielding's view of human nature.[450] This is at its most explicit, of course, in the relationship between Tom and Blifil. As I have noted, Blifil is the most thoroughly evil character in the work but, even here, Fielding is less interested in showing the

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[446] Margaret Jacobs interestingly links such social tension with the Latitudinarian emphasis on the virtue of the work ethic. 'The natural religion they [Latitudinarians] articulated was intended to suit the needs of the prosperous, or to be more precise, the strivings of those who would seek to profit and remain virtuous.' Margaret Jacobs, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689-1720* (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1976), p. 55.
[447] *Joseph Andrews*, I.12. See Chapter 2.
[448] Luke 10. 29-37.
[449] Irwin, *Fielding: The Tentative Realist*, p. 63.
[450] *Tom Jones*, I.i.25.

darkness of Blifil than in displaying the shades of grey which colour Tom's life. Fielding wishes us to be surprised with Allworthy at Tom's benevolence toward Blifil: "'Child,' cries Allworthy, 'you carry this forgiving Temper too far.'"[451]

Forgiveness is once more to the fore in an important passage from *Joseph Andrews* where we see it subverted by Fielding as he places the foolish cleric, Barnabas, in the difficult position of defining the very act he wishes to inculcate in the thought-to-be-dying Joseph:

> Mr Barnabas was again sent for, and with much difficulty prevailed on to make another visit. As soon as he entered the room he told Joseph "He was come to pray by him, and to prepare him for another world: in the first place, therefore, he hoped he had repented of all his sins." Joseph answered, "He hoped he had; but there was one thing which he knew not whether he should call a sin; if it was, he feared he should die in the commission of it; and that was, the regret of parting with a young woman whom he loved as tenderly as he did his heart-strings." Barnabas bad him be assured "that any repining at the Divine will was one of the greatest sins he could commit; that he ought to forget all carnal affections, and think of better things." Joseph said, "That neither in this world nor the next he could forget his Fanny; and that the thought, however grievous, of parting from her for ever, was not half so tormenting as the fear of what she would suffer when she knew his misfortune." Barnabas said, "That such fears argued a diffidence and despondence very criminal; that he must divest himself of all human passions, and fix his heart above." Joseph answered, "That was what he desired to do, and should be obliged to him if he would enable him to accomplish it." Barnabas replied, "That must be done by grace." Joseph besought him to discover how he might attain it. Barnabas answered, "By prayer and faith." He then questioned him concerning his forgiveness of the thieves. Joseph answered, "He feared that was more than he could do; for nothing would give him more pleasure than to hear they were taken." - "That," cries Barnabas, "is for the

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[451] *Tom Jones*, XVIII.xi.632.

sake of justice." - "Yes," said Joseph, "but if I was to meet them again, I am afraid I should attack them, and kill them too, if I could." - "Doubtless," answered Barnabas, "it is lawful to kill a thief; but can you say you forgive them as a Christian ought?" Joseph desired to know what that forgiveness was. "That is," answered Barnabas, "to forgive them as— as - it is to forgive them as - in short, it is to forgive them as a Christian." - Joseph replied, "He forgave them as much as he could." - "Well, well," said Barnabas, "that will do." He then demanded of him, "If he remembered any more sins unrepented of; and if he did, he desired him to make haste and repent of them as fast as he could, that they might repeat over a few prayers together." Joseph answered, "He could not recollect any great crimes he had been guilty of, and that those he had committed he was sincerely sorry for." Barnabas said that was enough, and then proceeded to prayer with all the expedition he was master of, some company then waiting for him below in the parlour, where the ingredients for punch were all in readiness; but no one would squeeze the oranges till he came.[452]

The perfunctory nature of Barnabas's dealings with Joseph not only reflects the lax attitude of some clerics which Fielding, himself had condemned, but, more significantly, and as we saw in Booth's 'conversion', puts the whole notion of a secure understanding of forgiveness and restitution into question. Once again, as in the conversation cited earlier between Parson Adams and an innkeeper, it is alcohol which calls a halt to any resolution. The spirit of true forgiveness is subverted by an altogether more natural spirit. And yet, we are aware that, even here, some semblance of what constitutes forgiveness is, in the case of Joseph himself, groped for.[453]

Returning to *Tom Jones*, we recognise that our chief role is to observe and that such observation involves discovery of ever deeper reservoirs of good nature in those who, at first sight, seem worthy of nothing more than condemnation. Indeed, at the point of

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[452] *Joseph Andrews*, I.13.47.

[453] In this regard, David Fergusson remarks that 'laughter is occasioned, perhaps even demanded, by a theology of the forgiveness of sins'. David Fergusson, 'Theology and Laughter', in *The God of Love and Human Dignity: Essays in Honour of George M. Newlands*, ed. by Paul Middleton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 107-116 (p. 115).

meeting between the redeemed Tom and the disgraced Blifil, Fielding seems less interested in Blifil's crime than in his response to the offer of forgiveness. He seems to have little time for over-effusive expressions of regret:

> Jones could not so far check his Disdain, but that it a little discovered itself in his Countenance at this extreme Servility. He raised his Brother the Moment he could from the Ground, and advised him to bear his Afflictions more like a Man; repeating, at the same Time, his Promises, that he would do all in his Power to lessen them.[454]

The capacity for mercy in the face of the guilty is tempered, then, by an equal desire for the penitent to act in a responsible fashion in the face of discovery – to grow up and, in modern parlance, 'face the music'.

Such a facing up to reality is reflected very much in Fielding's last novel, *Amelia*. Yet, even here the tension between the serious activity of the law and the novelist's ability to take liberties with it is in evidence. In the early paragraphs of *Amelia* we find:

> On the first of April, in the Year ——, the Watchmen of a certain Parish (I know not particularly which) within the Liberty of *Westminster*, brought several Persons they had apprehended the preceding Night, before *Jonathan Thrasher*, Esq; one of the Justices of the Peace for that Liberty.[455]

In this paragraph, we are introduced, not to the omniscient narrator of *Tom Jones*, but to a witness to events. Fielding places himself in the witness box and attempts to tell the whole truth (for the law is a serious business) and nothing but the truth. That he cannot precisely give the year or the exact location but reveals to us that the events took place on April Fool's Day, indicates Fielding's ambivalent approach to even this, the darkest of his novels.

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[454] *Tom Jones*, XVIII.xi.632.
[455] *Amelia*, 1.2.15.

This said, Fielding does not stay in the witness box for long and, as we have earlier noted, moves to interrogate his characters. In *Amelia*, it is Booth whom Fielding, as barrister, seeks to defend:

> We desire, therefore, the good-natured and candid reader will be pleased to weigh attentively the several unlucky circumstances which concurred so critically, that Fortune seemed to have used her utmost endeavours to ensnare poor Booth's constancy. Let the reader set before his eyes a fine young woman, in a manner, a first love, conferring obligations and using every art to soften, to allure, to win, and to enflame; let him consider the time and place; let him remember that Mr. Booth was a young fellow in the highest vigour of life; and, lastly, let him add one single circumstance, that the parties were alone together; and then, if he will not acquit the defendant, he must be convicted, for I have nothing more to say in his defence.[456]

Fielding, in this passage, appears well aware of the risks he is running with the material that he is presenting to his readership. Like any decent defence counsel, he seeks to present mitigating circumstances for his client's behaviour. That the self-same barrister is responsible for the chain of events in the narrative process, serves to leave the reader in a position of a misplaced judgement. Who is in the dock, Booth, Fielding, or indeed the reader? The narrative leaves us unclear as to where ultimate responsibility lies and, indeed, whether there is a charge to be defended in the first place. Fielding, in other words, opens up the whole juridical process by gently intruding as both novelist and defence counsel, and misplaces the legal edifice of which we as jurors/readers play our part.

Fielding's desire to see individuals grow up and assume responsibility goes beyond the immediate socio-historical milieu in which he was writing. We, too, are implicated in this misplaced legal process. From a purely historical perspective, it may be legitimate to claim that Fielding's interpretation of this coming to maturity is not dependent upon destroying the system, but in recognising that it is there; and that

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[456] *Amelia*, 4.1.148.

individuals share a common responsibility before a legal system which, though flawed, has the interests of the individual at its heart. Equally, we can suggest that, for Fielding, liberty is best understood, in Miller's words, as 'a grant to the educated and responsible members of society, and it carried with it the obligations of intelligent use, restraint, and the recognition of an inherent scale of subordination'.[457] In other words, 'growing up' for Fielding means seeing things as they are and not as we would wish them to be.

All of this has its place, but the far more significant 'seeing things as they are' is an awareness that is based upon our ability to see things as they aren't. In other words, as we have previously indicated, the legal process is itself a narrative process. Fielding, then, in his fiction provides us with, not only an awareness of the shades of grey which make up the palette of the human condition, not least before the law, but exposes the law itself to the misplacement of all processes borne out of frailty.

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[457] Henry Knight Miller, *Essays on Fielding's Miscellanies: A Commentary on Volume One* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 103.

Chapter Six

Measuring Mimesis and Misplacement: Realism, Rule and Revelation in Fielding

'There's no remaking reality'

Philip Roth

The Mimetic Heritage

Earlier in this study, we encountered in the work of Tobin the suggestion that eighteenth-century readers greatly valued the expression and experience of reality that was to be found particularly within the pages of the novel. The novelist, Clara Reeve (1729-1807), spoke for many a lover of this new form when she offered the following contrast:

> The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. The novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. The novel gives a familiar relation to 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 present 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 and distresses of the persons in the story, as if they were our own.[458]

Reeve could easily have been paraphrasing William Congreve, who, in his *Incognita* (1692), offered the same contrast noting that, unlike Romance, novels 'come near us, and represent to us intrigues in practice'.[459] More specifically, Reeve goes on to credit Fielding's achievements in this endeavour, noting that he 'certainly painted Human

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[458] Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* vol. I, p.111, quoted in Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 143.
[459] William Congreve, *Incognita* (London: Hesperus Press, Ltd, 2003), p. 5.

Nature *as it is* rather than *as it ought to be*'.[460] Similarly, Elizabeth Carter, in a letter to Catherine Talbot, sought to defend *Tom Jones* against those who compared it unfavourably with Richardson's *Clarissa*:

> I am sorry to find you so outrageous about poor Tom Jones; he is no doubt an imperfect, but not a detestable character, with all that honesty, good-nature and generosity of temper. Though nobody can admire *Clarissa* more than I do, yet with all our partiality, I am afraid, it must be confessed, that Fielding's book is the most natural representation of what passes in the world, and of the bizarreries which arise from the mixture of the good and bad, which makes up the composition of most folks.[461]

For all that Fielding's work was admired for its affecting realism, yet there were those who saw in that same literary exercise, and in *Tom Jones* especially, an insidious threat. Johnson's view was clear enough; the presentation of reality was welcome insofar as it held within it an educative and morally beneficial purpose. He appeared committed to those 'veridical elements in the constitution of the universe which are of higher worth than gross and unselected reality itself'.[462] The subject matter of a work like *Tom Jones* certainly, for Johnson, did not fit into that filtered category.

> It is justly considered as the greatest Excellency of art, to imitate nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature, which are most proper for imitation: greater care is still required in representing life, which is so often discoloured by passion, or deformed by wickedness. If the world be promiscuously described, I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account.[463]

Johnson's view, here, appears to be part of a wider interpretative strategy of suspicion whereby imagination can, if left unchecked, have dangerous consequences:

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[460] Rawson, *Henry Fielding: A Critical Anthology*, p. 186.
[461] Ibid., p. 105.
[462] M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 35.
[463] John Wain, ed., *Johnson as Critic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 69.

> There is no man whose imagination does not sometimes predominate over
> his reason, who can regulate his attention wholly by his will, and whose
> ideas will come and go at his command. No man will be found in whose
> mind airy notions do not sometimes tyrannize, and force him to hope or
> fear beyond the ability of sober probability. All power of fancy over
> reason is a degree of insanity; but while this power is such as we can
> control and repress, it is not visible to others, nor considered as any
> depravation of the mental faculties: it is not pronounced madness but
> when it becomes ungovernable, and apparently influences speech and
> action.[464]

Doubtless, Johnson here, as Greene comments, is not deprecating the imaginative faculty out of hand.[465] After all, Johnson's own *Rasselas* (1759) is itself a work of imagination. There was room in the neo-classicist's critical arsenal for what Pope, in his *Essay on Criticism* (1709), described as 'a grace beyond the reach of art'; in other words, the stroke of genius. What had to be kept in mind was that, for the neo-classicists at least, such genius was comparatively rare (and probably absent from contemporary art). The maxim of Horace: 'Art that hides art' was the watchword, and therefore art was regarded never solely for its own sake, but for the sake of humanity. Any attempt to move beyond these classical confines was to be resisted.

From the passage in *Rasselas* quoted above, however, one cannot but harbour the nagging sense that Johnson has more in mind than the intellect being exposed to the risk of mere madness. The first sentence itself leaves us with the distinct impression that reason and imagination are almost to be regarded as separate aspects of the human intellectual framework – a little like the perennial tension between Apollo and Dionysius. Imagination has to be held in check, for otherwise what has hitherto been hidden or secured, may be let loose. The imagination is not safe. It therefore must be somehow domesticated in order that it be of service to the sensibilities of right-thinking people. Imagination thus ought never to run riot. In so saying, Johnson is typical of critics of the period who sought to define empirically that which was

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[464] Samuel Johnson, 'The History of Rasselas', in *The Major Works*, ed. by Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 406-7.
[465] Ibid., p. 812.

worthy of reflection or representation in art. The mirror must be selectively held up to the world in order that only those pleasant and beautiful components may legitimately be reflected therein.

In this chapter, I wish to argue for a less prescriptive approach to the apprehension and execution of mimesis as witnessed in the novels of Fielding, and I also seek to indicate the key role of imagination in the creation, not only of the novel form, but also, by extension, the literary canon itself. At first glance, this latter desire may seem somewhat unambitious in that the role imagination plays in any artistic creation is regarded as fundamental. As I hope to show, however, Fielding is deeply aware of the potential subversion that takes place in the act of representation, and it is this subversion driven by the imagination which actually leads us beyond the mere imitative to the heart of the novel's function as a new creation. Ultimately, this new creation holds within it the means to both define and destroy what we understand as canonicity, and it is at this point where we discern the novel's sacramental nature. For the novel, like a sacrament pointing both to the human and divine nature of reality, holds the elemental and transcendental in a mutual tension within which each has the potential to subsume the other. In all of this, we are also inevitably faced with the question as to the nature and scope of revelation. Can we, indeed, recognise some active revelation in a fictional narrative and, as a result, reach toward some understanding of the nature of Fielding's God? Let us, first of all, trace some examples within Fielding's fiction which indicate for us his awareness of the danger of the mimetic act.

Fielding's Mischievous Mimesis

Fielding, the dramatist, was no doubt conscious of Hamlet's definition of playing 'whose end, both at the first, and now, was, and is, to hold, as 't were, the mirror up to nature' (*Hamlet* III. 2), and was more than aware of the pedigree of the mimetic analogy and its discriminatory usage. However, this awareness does not prohibit Fielding from suspecting it as merely a laudable but ultimately flawed attempt to present reality to us. For example, in the dénouement to *Tom Jones*, we find Sophia

and Tom at last together and Tom attempts to alleviate any anxiety she may have regarding his fidelity:

'After what is past, Sir, can you expect I should take you upon your Word?'

He replied, 'Don't believe me upon my Word; I have a better security, a Pledge for my Constancy, which it is impossible to see and to doubt.'

'What is that?' said *Sophia*, a little surprised. 'I will show you, my charming Angel,' cried *Jones*, seizing her Hand and carrying her to the Glass. 'There, behold it there in that lovely Figure, in that Face, that Shape, those Eyes, that Mind which shines through those Eyes: can the Man who shall be in Possession of these be inconstant? Impossible! my *Sophia*; they would fix a Dorimant, a Lord Rochester. You could not doubt it, if you could see yourself with any Eyes but your own.' *Sophia* blushed and half smiled; but, forcing again her Brow into a frown, 'If I am to judge,' said she, 'of the future by the past, my Image will no more remain in your Heart when I am out of your Sight, than it will in this Glass when I am out of the Room.' 'By Heaven, by all that is sacred,' said *Jones*, 'it never was out of my heart. The Delicacy of your Sex cannot conceive the Grossness of ours, nor how little one Sort of Amour has to do with the Heart.' 'I will never marry a man,' replied *Sophia*, very gravely, 'who shall not learn refinement enough to be as incapable as I am myself of making such a distinction.' 'I will learn it,' said *Jones*. 'I have learnt it already.'[466]

Fielding, in this passage, is toying with the empirical notion of the mimetic so popular in the eighteenth century. What at first glance appears to be a tender scene of reconciliation framed by the metaphor of the glass is, on closer inspection, a more complex and subversive encounter. Those critics, such as Johnson, who wished to hold up to the artistic mirror those worthy elements of reality – beauty and truth – would, of course, be delighted by the surface imagery adopted by Fielding here. The beautiful and wise Sophia (the very personification of wisdom), is placed before the

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[466] *Tom Jones*, XVIII.xii.635.

mirror. She, rather than the mere promise of Tom, is to be the real guarantee of faithfulness and true love. Tom's fragile word is sublimated by the substance of Sophia, herself. It is her image that sets in relief and subsequently destroys the 'grossness' which has hitherto clouded Tom's journey. Framed in the mirror, she becomes an icon of Tom's sanctification.

But she also blushes and half smiles! No icon ever exhibited such behaviour. Sophia, the indomitable Sophia, has a little streak of vanity. And that is all it takes to crack a plaster saint. For, of course, that is in many respects what Sophia is. Once again Fielding explodes the very image he elaborately sets up. But this should not surprise us, particularly with regard to Sophia. Take, for example, Fielding's introduction to Tom's belovèd:

> HUSHED be every ruder Breath. May the Heathen Ruler of the Winds confine in iron Chains the boisterous Limbs of noisy *Boreas*, and the sharp-pointed Nose of bitter-biting *Eurus*. Do thou, sweet *Zephyrus*, rising from thy fragrant Bed, mount the western Sky, and lead on those delicious Gales, the Charms of which call forth the lovely *Flora* from her Chamber, perfumed with pearly Dews, when on the first of *June*, her Birth-day, the blooming maid, in loose Attire, gently trips it over the verdant Mead, where every Flower rises to do her Homage, till the whole Field becomes enamelled, and Colours contend with Sweets which shall ravish her most. So charming may she now appear; and you the feather'd Choristers of Nature, whose sweetest Notes not even *Handel* can excel, tune your melodious Throats to celebrate her Appearance. From Love proceeds your Music, and to Love it returns. Awaken therefore that gentle Passion in every Swain; for lo! adorned with all the Charms in which Nature can array her; bedecked with Beauty, Youth, Sprightliness, Innocence, Modesty, and Tenderness, breathing Sweetness from her rosy Lips, and darting Brightness from her sparkling Eyes, the, lovely *Sophia* comes.[467]

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[467] *Tom Jones*, IV.ii.101-2.

One can easily recognise the irony in this apparently sublime overture. But just in case it is lost on his reader, Fielding follows up his overblown panegyric with this:

> Sophia then, the only Daughter of Mr Western, was a middle sized Woman; but rather inclining to tall.[468]

Given this particular turn from the prosaically sublime to the sublimely prosaic, it is hard to believe that Fielding has perennially found himself accused of flat characterisation. Either, it is argued, his characters are considered too easily drawn from real life:

> Parson Young sat for Fielding's Parson Adams, a man he knew, and only made a little more absurd that he is known to be. In his *Tom Jones*, his hero is made a natural child, because his own first wife was such. Tom Jones is Fielding himself, hardened in some places, softened in others. His Lady Bellaston is an infamous woman of his former acquaintance. His Sophia is his first wife. Booth, in his last piece, again himself; Amelia, even to her noselessness, is again his first wife.[469]

or they are accused of merely being coarse representations, so Mrs Thrale could remark that 'Richardson had picked the kernel of life…while Fielding was contented with the husk'.[470]

Such a critique fails to contend, not only with the consistent artful irony at play in Fielding's work, but also with the crucial recognition by Fielding of the plasticity of character itself. Indeed, it is surely not an overstatement to suggest, as Korshin has done, that Fielding thought more about the nature of character than any other eighteenth-century writer.[471] He was clearly aware of the tension between

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[468] *Tom Jones*, IV.ii.101-2.

[469] 'Letter from Samuel Richardson to Anne Donnellan 22nd February 1752', in Rawson, ed., *Henry Fielding: A Critical Anthology*, p. 130.

[470] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 261.

[471] Paul J. Korshin, 'Probability and Character in the Eighteenth Century', in *Probability, Time and Space in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. by Paula R. Backscheider (New York: AMS Press, 1979), p. 71.

representation of character and the production of stock types. So, with his tongue set firmly in his cheek, we hear him argue in the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*:

> And here I solemnly protest, I have no Intention to vilify or asperse any one: for tho' every thing is copied from the Book of Nature, and scarce a Character or Action produced which I have not taken from my own Observation and Experience, yet I have used the utmost Care to obscure the Persons by such different Circumstances, Degrees, and Colours, that it will be impossible to guess at them with any degree of Certainty.[472]

The example of Sophia, above, surely serves as testimony to Fielding's ability to mock his own creation while, at the same moment, exhibiting an acute awareness of the slippage that takes place between the presentation of character and the elusive reality it is intended to emulate. One cannot escape the implication that, in the passages in *Tom Jones* cited above, an assault is being carried out, not only upon novelistic hagiography (Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* being the obvious target), but also upon the very notion of mimesis itself. Fielding is asking us the question whether, regardless of the source of artistic expression, be it in the empirical or the transcendental sphere, can we *in all honesty* represent anything? The analogy of the mirror holds within it fundamental epistemological and artistic concerns. Do we, in the end, inevitably behave in the way Sophia accuses Tom of behaving, that is, of just as easily forgetting the image when out of the room or away from the glass? In other words, is the temptation with this particular approach to a work of art that individual artistic expression (i.e., imagination), is sacrificed upon the altar of verisimilitude?[473] Sophia's question: 'Can you expect I should take you upon your Word?' takes upon itself a significance far beyond the immediate domestic context.

It appears then, in this respect, that Fielding finds himself ahead of his time and, though for differing reasons, is in broad agreement with Oscar Wilde, whose own high view of Art as Art led him to deprecate the entire naturalist assumption:

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[472] *Joseph Andrews*, p. 8.
[473] See Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 34.

Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place…Art itself is really a form of exaggeration; and selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of over-emphasis…Art, breaking from the prison-house of realism, will run to greet [the liar], and will kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style…She is a veil, rather than a mirror.[474]

Wilde, of course, is following on in the romantic tradition of seeking to disengage with the empiricist approach to language which says what it means and means what it says. David Shaw makes this point in his study, *The Lucid Veil*:

I prefer the metaphor of the lucid veil to that of the mirror of nature because by suggesting a norm of transparent knowing that is in practice rare, the mirror blunts the force of Wittgenstein's insight that 'we predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it'. […] Indeed, transparency is a limit, and when the mind reaches that limit the metaphor breaks down.[475]

In this chapter, therefore, I do not wish to remain on the transparent ground that Johnson uses to fight his argument. Johnson, through a combination of his own empiricist analysis of the artistic act, coupled with a robust moral sense, places too much emphasis upon the outward and ethical issues apparently thrown up in the likes of *Tom Jones*. He seems more interested in the risks that may befall those youths who read for pleasure rather than actively engaging with the text as it is. Reflecting upon Wilde's comments above, we can clearly discern that Johnson is either unaware of, or chooses to ignore the 'unnatural' aspects of his own natural selection.

However, in so describing the imitation of nature as the mark of excellence in art, Johnson does offer us an instructive way in to what I consider to be a more

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[474] Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (Leicester: Galley Press, 1987), pp. 909-931.
[475] W. David Shaw, *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age* (London: The Athlone Press Ltd, 1987), p. 2.

fundamental question, namely the relationship between mimesis and misplacement; that is, as we have indicated, the slippage that occurs in any attempt to present the truth. Doubtless, questions of morality are implicated in such an approach, not least because morality, in and of itself, is a 'real' phenomenon insofar as its execution at the personal or, more particularly, institutional level can have immediate and tangible effects upon an individual. Such moral judgement inevitably becomes subject to the very ambiguity I am bearing witness to in my thesis (as we saw in Chapter 5).

My broader aim in the current chapter is to discover how Fielding, in his fiction, presents reality to us. It is, of course, vitally important that we recognise that the term 'realism' did not have the currency in Fielding's day that it was to have in the nineteenth century. Fielding's desire to present HUMAN NATURE in *Tom Jones* is, for example, very different from that of George Eliot who, in *Adam Bede*, makes clear her realist manifesto:

> 'This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!' I hear one of my lady readers exclaim. 'How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice. You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things – quite as good reading as a sermon.'
>
> Certainly I could, my fair critic, if I were a clever novelist, not obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact, but able to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, my characters would be entirely of my own choosing, and I could select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But you must have perceived long ago that I have no such lofty vocation, and that I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.[476]

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[476] George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by Stephen Gill (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 177.

Eliot adopts a juridical allegory to emphasize her dependence upon what she regards as the faithful and true witness to events in the real world. The oath she pronounces refers, one assumes, to the swearing of a witness upon a Bible – an arresting analogy given Eliot's own theological background. Fielding, however, makes no such dramatic plea. There is less urgency in Fielding's presentation of mimesis. The Bill of Fare metaphor that Fielding adopts in the opening of *Tom Jones* is testimony enough to his less intense approach to the execution of his new species of writing. If it can be put this way, there is less evangelical fervour about Fielding's representation of reality. Johnson and Eliot, in their varying ways, share the same missionary zeal for their respective understandings of realism. Johnson values the importance of traditional religious (Anglican) moral virtue above tawdriness, while Eliot prizes 'the supersession of God by Humanity, of Faith by Love and Sympathy, the elimination of the supernatural, the elevation of the natural, the subordination of intellect to heart, thought to feeling'.[477] Both Johnson and Eliot harbour a crusading spirit in the promotion of their respective positions. Fielding does not share the same passion in his presentation of reality. This is because he is presciently aware of the artistic deceit which, over two hundred years later, William H. Gass describes so vividly:

> In every art two contradictory impulses are in a state of Manichean war:
> the impulse to communicate and so treat the medium of communication as
> a means and the impulse to make an artefact out of the materials and so to
> treat the medium as an end.[478]

The novel, for Fielding, has a pedigree in the epic form, but it also shares with romance a less refined heritage. The presentation of reality in the form he describes as the comic-epic poem in prose, cannot but take less seriously its own ability to offer a sense of reality that is not exposed by its own artificiality. And yet, there is, in this very recognition, a sense of the importance of this artistic impossibility. Returning to the Bill of Fare metaphor we find this intriguing and amusing statement:

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[477] Basil Willey, *Nineteenth-Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 247.
[478] Quoted in Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 14-15.

> In reality, true Nature is as difficult to be met with in Authors as the *Bayonne* Ham or *Bologna* Sausage is to be found in the Shops.[479]

Here, Fielding is, of course, directly attacking the writers of vulgar Romance. He does not want his work to be mistaken for cheaper forms of entertainment. The question remains, though, as to whether Fielding regarding himself as their superior actually succeeds where they had patently failed. I would argue that the placement of this question in the centre of a metaphoric trope indicates less than complete confidence in the mimetic project.

My suggestion, then, is that the reality we are presented with in Fielding is not the reality that Johnson or Eliot would wish it to be. Yet, ultimately, it is not the reality Fielding wishes it to be either. My contention is that, in Fielding's fiction, his celebrated realism exposes, not only the glorious fragility of the human condition, but the entire mimetic façade itself. Mimesis fails to point to reality. It becomes merely a self-reflecting rhetorical device. Mimesis, as an activity, is, rephrasing the Buddhist expression, like pointing at God and merely focussing on one's finger. The reality is far greater than that which seeks to illustrate it. And yet, paradoxically, as Ortega has written, 'the real things do not move us but their representation – that is to say, the representation of their reality – does.'[480] Representations of reality are, simultaneously, all and nothing. They are the artistic sacraments formed of the stuff of the earth but which point to the unearthly.

How then do we illustrate this contention from the work of Fielding himself? I believe we must begin with Fielding's naming of his own creation. In this nominative strategy we find both a connection with mimetic tradition and a desire to move beyond it. We begin, then, with his fundamental artistic self-assessment in the preface to *Joseph Andrews* where he describes the work as a 'comic-epic poem in prose'. Such an epithet bears witness, not only to Fielding's awareness of his indebtedness to the mimetic heritage, but also to his implicit desire to reframe his creation according to his own lights. The result is a work of art which is both self-conscious and, at the

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[479] *Tom Jones*, I.i.26.
[480] José Ortega Y Gasset, 'Realistic Poetry', in *Meditations on Quixote*, trans. by Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marin (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 144.

same time, hermeneutically unconstrained. Within this initial self-assessment we find a fundamental strategy at work, that of literary misplacement.

Literary Misplacement

Fielding frequently punctuates his comic novels with references to writers of antiquity or others in the contemporary canon, in order to confirm his own position or to expound upon the situation of a particular character. Thus, we find him (in mockery of those who believe the age of genius is passed) calling on the muse of Genius to aid him in his labours:

> Whose Assistance shall I invoke to direct my Pen?
> First, Genius; thou Gift of Heaven; without whose Aid in vain we struggle against the Stream of Nature. Thou who dost sow the generous Seeds which Art nourishes, and brings to Perfection. Do thou kindly take me by the Hand, and lead me through all the Mazes, the winding Labyrinths of Nature. Initiate me into all those Mysteries which profane Eyes never beheld. Teach me, which to thee is no difficult Task, to know Mankind better than they know themselves. Remove that Mist which dims the Intellects of Mortals, and causes them to adore Men for their Art, or to detest them for their Cunning in deceiving others, when they are, in Reality, the objects only of ridicule, for deceiving themselves. Strip off the thin Disguise of Wisdom from Self-Conceit, of Plenty from Avarice, and of Glory from Ambition. Come, thou that hast inspired thy *Aristophanes*, thy *Lucian*, thy *Cervantes*, thy *Rabelais*, thy *Molière*, thy *Shakespeare*, thy *Swift*, thy *Marivaux*, fill my Pages with Humour, till Mankind learn the Good-Nature to laugh only at the Follies of others, and the Humility to grieve at their own.[481]

Ostensibly, Fielding's plea fits well with traditional Augustan humility before the arduous task of the artist, whose responsibility is to reflect the glory of Nature,

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[481] *Tom Jones*, XIII.i.443-4.

herself. Yet, the awareness of his connectivity with these literary giants past and present (Marivaux was still living at the publication of *Tom Jones*), sets himself apart and above these to a position of even greater glory. This calling upon the muse is the joke of the comic who reckons rightly the greatness of the task and that the true source of genius lies, not in the lap of the gods, but in his own hands.

So, for example, we hear Mrs Fitzpatrick, in conversation with Sophia, lamenting her solitude and finding solace in literature:

> 'At length, my Friend was removed from me, and I was again left to my Solitude, to the tormenting Conversation with my own Reflections, and to apply to Books for my only Comfort. I now read almost all day long. – How many Books do you think I read in three Months?' 'I can't guess, indeed, Cousin,' answered *Sophia*. – 'Perhaps half a Score!' 'Half a Score! half a Thousand, Child,' answered the other. 'I read a good deal in *Daniel's English* History of *France*; a great deal in *Plutarch's* Lives; the *Atlantis*, *Pope's* Homer, *Dryden*'s Plays, *Chillingworth,* the *Countess D'Anois*, and *Lock*'s Human Understanding.'[482]

The adoption of this particular tactic does, of course, reinforce the sense of 'reality' in the work as a whole - the reference to 'real' works of literature within the story serving to concretize the action by immediate and relevant reference to an 'existing' tradition (in this case a literary canon of sorts). But in Fielding's hands, this 'fiction within a fiction' strategy carries a greater significance. The above example hides within it an awareness of the limitations of literature. Such wide reading has not served Harriet Fitzpatrick well. Though she considers herself one who has 'Understanding equal to the wisest and greatest of the other Sex', Harriet finds all such knowledge superfluous in the perilous choice of a lover. In Fielding, as Alter has pointed out, we find ourselves moved 'toward an awareness of the different possibilities of representing reality than toward a simple assent to the authority of an art more verisimilar than the conventional sort'.[483]

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[482] *Tom Jones*, XI.vii.386.
[483] Alter, *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel*, p. 103.

Fielding provides us with a similar theological example in the earlier *Shamela* (1741), where we hear Parson Tickletext proclaim of *Pamela*:

> Happy would it be for Mankind, if all other Books were burnt, that we might do nothing but read thee all Day, and dream of thee all Night. Thou alone art sufficient to teach us much Morality as we want. Dost thou not teach us to pray, to sing Psalms, and to honour the Clergy? Are not these the whole Duty of Man? Forgive me, O Author of *Pamela,* mentioning the Name of a Book so unequal to thine.[484]

The name dropped here, of course, is most likely the divine, Richard Allestree (1619-81), whose *Whole Duty of Man* (1658) was a hugely influential spiritual guide of the period and for many years to come. That Fielding chose to place this almost sacred work alongside his racy *Shamela*, enhances both the sense of shock but also, paradoxically, the awareness of the text as found in exactly the context that Richardson himself surely sought for the 'official' *Pamela*.

All of this points to Fielding's comic novels as works of *metafiction* - that self-conscious and self-deprecating literature which displays its wares and is prepared to have them exposed as fraudulent or shoddy. As Patricia Waugh states:

> Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction.[485]

Waugh, here, has in her sights modernist and postmodernist fiction. She argues that the post–war climate cleared away many of the assumptions and certainties taken for granted by previous literary generations. The resultant anxiety was to produce art

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[484] Henry Fielding, *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews*, ed. by Homer Goldberg (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987), p. 277.
[485] Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 6.

which testified to the epistemological frailty now endemic within society. In so arguing, she does acknowledge, however, that *all* fiction can be seen as metafictive for 'the language of fiction is always, if covertly, self-conscious'.[486] I would argue that Henry Fielding was as aware as any artist could be of the tension that Waugh describes. The 'textuality' of Fielding's comic fiction provides us with evidence of Fielding's awareness of the deceit he is prepared to carry out in the presentation of a reality within reality. The comic text becomes in Fielding the proving ground for fiction. This 'proving' has within it, of course, the sense of 'testing' but it also harbours the more significant possibility of 'rebuttal'.

This double sense of proving is found in a further and most distinctive example of literary misplacement concerning the inimitable Parson Adams and his (only?) constant 'companion' – his copy of Aeschylus. In the following passage we discover Adams (and Aeschylus) before the magistrate:

> The Clerk now acquainted the Justice, that among other suspicious things, as a Penknife, &c., found in *Adams's* Pocket, they had discovered a Book written, as he apprehended, in Ciphers: for no one could read a Word in it. 'Ay,' says the Justice, 'this Fellow may be more than a common Robber, he may be in a Plot against the Government. - Produce the Book.' Upon which the poor Manuscript of *Æschylus*, which *Adams* had transcribed with his own Hand, was brought forth; and the Justice looking at it, shook his Head, and turning to the Prisoner, asked the Meaning of those Ciphers. 'Ciphers!' answered *Adams*, 'it is a Manuscript of *Æschylus*.' 'Who? who?' said the Justice. *Adams* repeated, '*Æschylus*.' 'That is an outlandish Name,' cried the Clerk. 'A fictitious Name rather, I believe,' said the Justice. One of the Company declared it looked very much like *Greek*. '*Greek*!' said the Justice; 'why 'tis all Writing.' 'Nay,' says the other, 'I don't positively say it is so: for it is a very long time since I have seen any *Greek*. There's one,' says he, turning to the Parson of the Parish, who was present, 'will tell us immediately.' The Parson, taking up the Book, and putting on his Spectacles and Gravity together, muttered some words to

[486] Ibid., p. 5.

himself, and then pronounced aloud – 'Ay indeed it is a *Greek* Manuscript, a very fine piece of Antiquity. I make no doubt but it was stolen from the same Clergyman from whom the Rogue took the Cassock.' 'What did the Rascal mean by his *Æschylus*?' says the Justice. 'Pooh!' answered the Doctor with a contemptuous Grin, 'do you think that Fellow knows anything of this Book? *Æschylus*! ho! ho! ho! I see now what it is - A Manuscript of one of the Fathers. I know a Nobleman who would give a great deal of Money for such a Piece of Antiquity. - Ay, ay, Question and Answer. The Beginning is the Catechism in *Greek*. - Ay, - ay, *Pollaki toi* - What's your Name?' – 'Ay, what's your name?' says the Justice to Adams, who answered, 'It is *Æschylus*, and I will maintain it.' – 'O! it is,' says the Justice; 'make Mr. *Æschylus* his *Mittimus*. I will teach you to banter me with a false Name.'[487]

While it is ostensibly Adams in the dock, the text, too, finds itself accused. Paradoxically, however, the text of Aeschylus, even as it is being judged or defined, in actuality becomes itself, a 'defining' character. From being progressively described as a threat against the crown to a valuable but stolen artefact to being mistaken for Adams himself, the text is continuously misunderstood and misplaced. However, at the same moment, the text is able to clearly and succinctly define those who seek to accuse it. Thus, the judge becomes no more than an ignorant boor; the clerk, a sycophantic pedant; the parson, a hypocritical ignoramus; the doctor, a pompous materialist. All four find themselves judged by the very text they seek to judge.

This textual judgement, of course, applies as much to Adams himself, throughout *Joseph Andrews* where we find that Aeschylus determines him as the well-meaning, lovable but quixotic cleric that he is. Following Joseph and Fanny's reunion, during the course of which, in order to minister aid to Fanny, Adams, absently throws his Aeschylus into the fire, we are presented with the option of observing either the lovers' ardour or Adams' own idiosyncratic capers:

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[487] *Joseph Andrews*, II.11.116.

If Prudes are offended at the Lusciousness of this Picture, they may take their Eyes off from it, and survey Parson *Adams* dancing about the Room in a Rapture of Joy. Some Philosophers may perhaps doubt whether he was not the happiest of the three; for the Goodness of his Heart enjoyed the Blessings which were exulting in the Breasts of both the other two, together with his own. But we shall leave such Disquisitions, as too deep for us, to those who are building some favourite Hypothesis, which they will refuse no Metaphysical Rubbish to erect and support: for our part, we give it clearly on the side of *Joseph*, whose Happiness was not only greater than the Parson's, but of longer Duration; for as soon as the first Tumults of *Adams's* rapture were over he cast his Eyes towards the Fire, where Æschylus lay expiring; and immediately rescued the poor Remains, to wit, the Sheepskin Covering, of his dear Friend, which was the Work of his own Hands, and had been his inseparable Companion for upwards of thirty Years.[488]

What is remarkable (and amusing) about this passage is the tactic Fielding adopts to use high literature as the vehicle by which pretentious or other-worldly attitudes (which would ordinarily be associated with such texts) can be punctured. Even in the act of its own destruction, the text can serve to throw light on the character of the individual. The comedy is only matched by the genuine poignancy of the fact that Adams has, indeed, lost his dearest friend, who, even as the last few hand-written pages are immolated, strives to teach a final lesson in the understanding of reality.

It is, of course, inevitable when we begin to talk of literary misplacement, that there can be both theological and philosophical implications. In a general sense, the grand narratives can be seen to be as susceptible to misplacement as any individual text thus far mentioned. Thwackum and Square respectively embody just such grand narratives and, at Fielding's hands, are equally censured. The stability of the realities which Thwackum and Square separately inhabit is undermined most evidently in a passage from *Tom Jones* where Tom is on his sickbed. Having injured himself saving Sophia from a frisky horse, Tom is subjected to the ministrations of the tyrannical Thwackum

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[488] *Joseph Andrews*, II.12.121-2.

and the clinical Square. Following Thwackum's suggestion that Tom's broken arm is evidence of God's judgement:

> *Square* talked in a very different Strain: he said, 'Such Accidents as a broken Bone were below the Consideration of a wise Man. That it was abundantly sufficient, to reconcile the Mind to any of these mischances, to reflect that they are liable, to befall the wisest of Mankind, and are undoubtedly for the Good of the Whole.' He said 'it was a mere Abuse of Words to call those Things Evils in which there was no moral Unfitness: That Pain, which was the worst consequence of such accidents, was the most contemptible Thing in the World;' with more of the like Sentences, extracted out of the Second Book of *Tully's* Tusculan Questions, and from the great Lord *Shaftesbury*. In pronouncing these he was one Day so eager, that he unfortunately bit his Tongue, and in such a manner that it not only put an End to his Discourse, but created much Emotion in him, and caused him to mutter an Oath or two; but what was worst of all, this Accident gave *Thwackum*, who was present, and who held all such Doctrine to be heathenish and atheistical, an Opportunity to clap a judgment on his Back. Now this was done with so malicious a Sneer that it totally unhinged (if I may so say) the temper of the Philosopher, which the bite of his Tongue had somewhat ruffled; and as he was disabled from venting his Wrath at his Lips, he had possibly found a more violent Method of revenging himself, had not the Surgeon, who was then luckily in the Room, contrary to his own Interest, interposed, and preserved the Peace.[489]

In this example, we find Fielding exposing the attempts that the religious and non-religious make to use or misuse texts to their own advantage. What Fielding appears to be saying here is that any grand narrative can always be broken down by the inconsistency of those who supposedly adhere to them. Paradoxically, then, it appears that System cannot stand in the face of human frailty.

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[489] *Tom Jones*, V.ii.141.

Such a general critique is made all the more specific when Fielding applies his literary misplacement to the Bible itself. A key passage, here, is once again in *Tom Jones*, where a conversation takes place between Sophia and her maid, Mrs Honour:

> And, to be sure, I could tell your Ladyship something, but that I am afraid it would offend you.'-'What could you tell me, Honour?' says Sophia. 'Nay, Ma'am, to be sure he meant nothing by it, therefore I would not have your Ladyship be offended.'-'Prithee tell me,' says *Sophia*; 'I will know it this Instant.' Why, Ma'am,' answered Mrs *Honour*, 'he came into the Room one Day last Week when I was at Work, and there lay your Ladyship's Muff on a Chair, and to be sure he put his Hands into it; that very Muff your Ladyship gave me but yesterday; "La," says I, "Mr *Jones*, you will stretch my Lady's Muff and spoil it;" but he still kept his Hands in it: and then he kissed it--to be sure I, hardly ever saw such a Kiss in my Life as he gave it.' - 'I suppose he did not know it was mine,' replied *Sophia*. 'Your Ladyship shall hear, Ma'am. He kissed it again and again, and said it was the prettiest Muff in the World. "La! sir," says I, "you have seen it a hundred times." - "Yes, Mrs *Honour*," cried he; "but who can see anything beautiful in the presence of your Lady but herself?" Nay, that's not all neither; but I hope your Ladyship won't be offended, for to be sure he meant nothing. One day, as your Ladyship was playin on the harpsichord to my Master, Mr *Jones* was sitting in the next Room, and methought he looked melancholy. "La!" says I, "Mr *Jones*, what's the Matter! A penny for your thoughts," says I; "Why, Hussy," says he, starting up from a Dream, "what can I be thinking of, when that Angel your Mistress is playing?" And then squeezing me by the Hand - "Oh! Mrs *Honour*," says he, "how happy will that Man be!"- and then he sighed; upon my Troth, his Breath is as sweet as a Nosegay - but to be sure he meant no harm by it. So I hope your Ladyship will not mention a Word: for he gave me a Crown never to mention it, and made me swear upon a Book, but I believe, indeed, it was not the Bible. [490]

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[490] *Tom Jones*, IV.xiv.135-6.

Fielding, in this instance, once again plays with the notion of literary authority, but on this occasion takes such liberties to their ultimate conclusion with his deliberate misplacement of the Bible. The context in which this misplacement takes place is a morally dubious one. Four artefacts find themselves in focus - Sophia's muff and harpsichord, the crown and the book. All four hold within them elements of dubiety. Both the muff and harpsichord share obvious sexual overtones whereas the juxtaposition of the crown with a book which may or may not be the Bible, clearly serves to undermine the authority of the latter. As a result, then, of Mrs Honour's sexually suggestive speech, the Scriptures become either indefinable or of less authoritative value than a common bribe – or both. It is little wonder then, that, at the end of her remarks, Sophia finds herself of a red 'more beautiful…than Vermillion'.

There is more than mere sexual double entendre here. The reality of these objects becomes questionable. All are placed in a subtler context in order to point to the greater reality, namely the love of Tom for Sophia. Even the Bible, it seems, can be sacrificed for the sake of true love.

There is evidence, here, as previously suggested, of a tension, a 'nervous pause' as to the presentation of reality. This nervousness lies, not only at the moral level, as Johnson would have it, but also at the epistemological. The tension indeed exists at the heart of both the Enlightenment project and in the postmodern debate as to the pursuit of meaning. Intellectual apprehension in both environments becomes a key area of theological and philosophical debate. This inevitably leads to questions regarding the nature and legitimacy of authority. During the eighteenth century, for example, we witness the anxiety produced by the early and unprecedented interrogation of the Scriptures – the basic rule of religion. The misplacement of the Bible in Fielding's comedy, despite the recurrent assessment of his work as a literary bastion of Anglicanism, in fact reflects that deeper sense of insecurity, albeit with a light-hearted veneer.

In the batting back and forth of the pamphleteers, we very quickly come to discern, in all the competing theological and ideological bluster, a certain shared and largely unspoken anxiety. The orthodox are as aware as the deists of the stakes. Even to think of the stakes, for some of the orthodox, proved too much. To question the 'givens' of

the faith was tantamount to giving up the ghost (and in the case of the doctrine of the Trinity, that held a rather more literal ring). What both sides recognised was that the reality of religious experience was based upon two factors: the authority handed down in the traditions of the church and chiefly in the dissemination and interpretation of the Scriptures, and secondly and crucially, the reason by which individuals can access and interpret and live out that particular authoritative revelation. The debate was, therefore, how these two factors could be harnessed to the service of the faith.

I would suggest that Fielding exhibits this very tension in his fiction. Beneath the apparently robust Anglican façade which provides the substantial theological superstratum for these works, there lies an acute concern for the stability of the orthodox position. This is not to say that Fielding saw himself as anything less than orthodox (although scholars like Paulson have hinted as much). There is, however, a strong awareness of the potential for mutability, at least at the level of theological praxis. Such awareness has its artistic roots in the presentation of reality, and, as I have noted, Fielding is more than aware of the slippage that occurs in such a presentation.

Moving into our own era, mimesis, basically understood as *art imitating life* has, through the critical lens of deconstruction, become a less secure descriptor of the processes by which we apprehend a work of art. Duyfhuizen points to the opposition that is assumed under the epithet, *art imitating life* – reality/representation – and concludes that, although this opposition 'appears logically natural…it can be deconstructed to reveal representation as always already coexistent with reality'.[491] As a result, one can conclude that life can legitimately be seen to imitate art. The traditional bounded relationship between author and reader, which established the foundation of mimesis, i.e. the intention of the author coupled with Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief' on the part of the reader, is, it would appear, set at nought in the light of deconstruction. How can we get to reality in the light of this? The answer, of course, is that we cannot. Or at least we cannot in the sense of a final, closed off and unsurpassable reading of reality. In his more recent discussion of the

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[491] Bernard Duyfhuizen, 'Mimesis, Authority, and Belief in Narrative Poetics: Towards a Transmission Theory for a Poetics of Fiction', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction,* Vol.18, No.3. (Spring, 1985), 217-22 (p. 219).

novel, James Wood believes that realism cannot be regarded as mere verisimilitude, but ought to encapsulate what he calls *lifeness* on the page. However, he is more than aware that to present this is unceasingly difficult:

> The true writer, that free servant of life, is one who must always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything the novel had yet grasped; as if life itself were always on the verge of becoming conventional.[492]

I would suggest that Henry Fielding understood Wood's analysis completely. Curiously, though, even Johnson, that 'embodiment of sturdy prejudice'[493] appeared to recognise this lack of finality in the experience of the real. In his *The History of Rasselas,* during the debate regarding the nature of the soul, he has the poet declare: 'It is no limitation of omnipotence… to suppose that one thing is not consistent with another, that the same proposition cannot be at once true and false.'[494]

Rule

A fundamental expression of this apparent conundrum is the experience of canon. It appears that we can commit ourselves to the canon, be it the scriptural or literary variety, in one of two ways. Either we can allow the weight of the tradition, which established or 'fixed' the canon, to be the sole arbiter of the constitution and interpretation of the canon; or we can adopt a less prescriptive and more dynamic understanding. The former mode would seek to establish a common ground of canonically acceptable readings of texts. These texts themselves would thus be read 'against' others in the canon. Each would inform upon the other according to the already established canonical principle. Hudson, for example, has argued that Johnson had 'a tendency to place far greater trust in the confidence of a tradition than in the brilliance of an individual'.[495]

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[492] James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p. 187.
[493] Stephen, *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* Vol. II, p. 372.
[494] Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas*, in *The Major Works*, p. 417.
[495] Nicholas Hudson, *Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 17.

We can detect here an understanding of the canon as a form of security against the threat of the innovator or the heretic. This, of course, as I have noted, fits with Johnson's wariness of the attempt to present reality, particularly in the moral sphere. Mimesis, according to Johnson, presents us with all kinds of hazards and threats. As a result, one must be prescriptive about what one considers literary or at least worthy of a wider readership. Only the safest text can find its way into the canon:

> Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful inventions may delight for a while, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose in the stability of truth.[496]

Ezra Pound, however, reverses this when he argues that 'good literature worries "lovers of order": they regard it as dangerous, chaotic subversive, because its exactitudes show no mercy to society's self-inflating tendencies.'[497] Bloom agrees when he writes that, 'the West's greatest writers are subversive of all values, both ours and their own'.[498] Presumably, at least some of the 'good literature' that Pound has in mind, finds itself in the canon. Reading Johnson and Pound, then, we find ourselves then in a curiously ambiguous position. Canonicity, it appears, plays some kind of dual role, insofar as it both preserves and subverts the very tradition it encapsulates.

Negatively, the canon may be regarded as a reactionary force determined upon its own rarefied course. As Leitch argues in a broader, but nonetheless apposite context:

> Tradition, while transmitting more and more knowledge, conceals truth; repository of self-evident, disembodied "truths", tradition, in the role of

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[496] Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to The Plays of William Shakespeare' in *The Major Works*, p. 420.
[497] Ezra Pound, 'How to Read', in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1954), pp. 15-40.
[498] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 29.

authority and master, blocks access to the genuine sources and primordial experiences in which truth originated.[499]

In this sense, the canon can exhibit the characteristics of the censor, blocking the path to more expansive literary experiences. The instinct when one studies, for example, the Scriptural canon, is to assume that its very authoritative closure prohibits any sense of an open reading of these texts. The canon can only be interpreted canonically. Though *no-one* can, the canon can. But, of course, this assumes a very restrictive view of canonicity.[500] Such a view is determined not simply by any literary-historical or even theological judgements. Ultimately, canonicity is determined through the prescriptive utilisation of power and exclusion. It is achieved through the awareness of the blasphemous and the heretic at the gate or, as Kermode puts it, 'the centrifugal force of heresy and schism'.[501] In this regard, we must be cognisant of the fact that there was no meaningful canon of the New Testament, in the normally received sense of the word, prior to Marcion. It can be argued that it was his so-called heresy which engendered the rush to orthodoxy. That being the case, there is little or nothing to be gained by crying over spilt agrapha. The canon, regardless of the political machinations and mythical exploits which lay behind its adoption, nonetheless exists. The question remains, however, is there more than one way to measure this canon? Can we, despite accepting the texts as we have them, examine canonicity in a broader way?

A useful interpretative tool in this endeavour is to cultivate the perspective of those early creators of what has come to be known as canonical or classic literature. What appears to be crucial in such an examination is how connected the art form (initially poetry) was to the audience who received it. As Ross indicates, the 'function of poetry was defined in terms of social instrumentality', and that its value 'measured wholly by

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[499] Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 67.

[500] See, for example, the so-called Canonical Criticism Project of Brevard S. Childs: *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979); *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM Press, 1984); *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM Press, 1985); and the corresponding critique by amongst others, John Barton, *People of the book?: the authority of the Bible in Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1993); *Reading the Old Testament: Methods in Biblical Study* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996); and James Barr, *Holy Scripture: canon, authority, criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

[501] Frank Kermode, 'The Canon', in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 602.

its utility within a moral order that was determined less by economic profit than by symbolism, rhetoric and representation'...Consumption was not distinguished from production'.[502] Canonicity, in this sense, dissolved the utilitarian and the artistic into one overriding cultural experience of the work of art. The cultural distance between the 'producers' and 'consumers' of what was later to be defined as 'literature' was, therefore, less pronounced. The emphasis overall was upon production, not reproduction. Indeed, the term 'canon' as we now understand it as a process of selection, did not exist until 1768.[503] There was a sense of vitality in the creative process which, one may legitimately argue, was somewhat domesticated by the rise of the book trade. Fielding indicates this economic turn of events in his *Amelia* where Booth, in his encounter with the 'great Author', having discovered the many and various literary opportunities that appeared to present themselves to the educated man, is made acutely aware of the harsh reality of the literary marketplace:

> 'Upon my Word, Sir,' cries *Booth*, you have greatly instructed me. I could not have imagined there had been so much Regularity in the Trade of Writing, as you are pleased to mention; by what I can perceive, the Pen and Ink is likely to become the Staple Commodity of the Kingdom.'
> 'Alas, Sir,' answered the Author, 'it is over-stocked – The Market is over-stocked. There is no Encouragement to Merit, no Patrons. I have been these five Years soliciting a Subscription for my new Translation of *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, with Notes explanatory, historical, and critical; and I have scarce collected five hundred Names yet.'[504]

The double edge to this encounter is, of course, that, while the Author is correct in his assessment of the state of the literary marketplace, he is, nonetheless, at the same moment, doing everything in his power to fleece Booth in order to serve his own mediocre literary endeavours. The commoditisation of literature becomes then, an unfortunate critical determinant in the assessment of artistic value. A move has taken place in the understanding of canonicity in which the work of art is set apart from its

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[502] Trevor Ross, 'The Emergence of "Literature": Making and Reading the English Canon in the Eighteenth Century', *ELH* 63.2 (1996), 397- 422.
[503] Jan Gorak, 'Canons and Canon Formation', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* Vol. IV, ed. by H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 560.
[504] *Amelia*, 8.5.333-4.

immediate artistic aim and has, as a result, become a mere artefact. The risk is that canonicity becomes, potentially, a shopping list of the fashionably mediocre.

But is that not the risk of literature? Is it not one of the dangerous trades? It is surely the case, as Fielding has illustrated for us above, that there is a sense in which the canon, by its very nature, is constantly subverting itself.

Canonicity as subversion appears virtually contradictory. However, if we bring to the canon Derrida's notion of différànce we may perhaps glimpse that the canon, however much we like to consider it as aesthetically, intellectually or culturally uniform is, in fact, embodied with plurality and ambiguity. Bloom has taken notice of this and has argued that tradition is neither temporally, nor critically or aesthetically stable. In his terms, canon can be regarded as an 'exercise in belatedness', a 'necessary misprision' and as 'daemonic' insofar as canon, or tradition has no referential aspect.[505] The fact that Fielding's *Tom Jones* finds a place in the canon, despite the protestations of arguably the greatest critic of the eighteenth century, is surely testimony to that uncomfortable reality. This is a point only partially acknowledged by Kermode who values the fact that 'one member [of the canon] nourishes or qualifies another, so that as well as benefiting from the life preserving attentions of commentary, each thrives on the propinquity of all'.[506] Here Kermode relishes the connectedness brought about by difference, but ignores the more worrisome reality that there *is* difference between canonical members. One cannot help but endorse William Carlos Williams' point in the light of this, when he states, 'There is nothing sacred about literature, it is damned from one end to the other. There is nothing in literature but change and change is mockery.'[507] It is this changeableness which subverts the notion of canon. In this sense, we can speak sensibly of membership of the canon comprising, not polite partners cosily nestling up against one another in some sort of inspired literary love-in, but instead, misplaced individuals butting up against one another in a crowded carriage headed for an unknown destination. The canon, though maintaining a substantial veneer of respectability and decorum, becomes, at the same moment,

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[505] Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 50.
[506] Frank Kermode, *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 33.
[507] Quoted in Herbert N. Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (London: University of California Press, 1976), p. 263.

literature's greatest joke against itself. In other words, the canon looks very much like a novel – a novel that Henry Fielding might write.

In the light of this, there seems little point, therefore, in calls for any kind of revision of the canon. After all that is not too difficult – Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, F.R. Leavis and Matthew Arnold all testify to the ease by which canons both religious and secular can be designed or re-designed. But it is worthwhile making a more difficult demand. That demand is that we continually recognise the fragility of the canon. By this, I mean that we must find ourselves open to the text before us and, as such, participate in the reality that its canonisation is an ongoing process. David Jasper envisages such a process when he writes, 'the concept of canon… must be tensioned between the sense of stability and the sense of adaptability, the tension being maintained by a relentless hermeneutic awareness.'[508] Indeed, I would suggest that the canon as literature continually calls out to be canonised. As Morrissey has stated, 'our continual rediscovery of [the canon's] seeming closure is also what keeps it open, always subject to addition and revision.'[509] This call cannot, however, be answered solely by the canon itself. This cannot be a monologue. The call by the canon is made to all literature, to all art, to all life. The response to this call is a recognising of the canon and such recognition forms the resolution of the tension that any deconstructive critique of mimesis threatens. In this respect, life is once again seen to imitate art, in the sense that, it is through recognition of the text that we experience life. 'The objective in writing is to reveal. It is not to teach, not to advertise, not to sell, not even to communicate (for that needs two) but to reveal.'[510]

This is a far less constrained and yet, at the same time, more canonical approach. For canonicity is less about rule and constraint than about 'recognition'. Recognition becomes the yardstick of misplacement. For after all, despite the remarks of either Johnson in the eighteenth century or Leavis in the twentieth, *Tom Jones* finds itself in

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[508] David Jasper, *Readings in the Canon of Scripture* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1995), p. 17.

[509] Lee Morrissey, *Debating the Canon* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 12. See, too, Elisabeth Jay's remarks regarding the transitoriness of Lot's wife as a metaphor for both identity and the canon: 'Her memorial was thus at its very inception an emblem of dissolution'. Elisabeth Jay, 'Why 'Remember Lot's Wife'? Religious Identity and the Literary Canon', in *Literary Canons and Religious Identity*, 33-49 (p. 43).

[510] William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 268.

the literary canon. How that can be, I believe, is down to Fielding's own ability to misplace, both wittingly and unwittingly, his own creation.

Fielding's awareness of producing a new form of literature, in a sense, actually misplaces the canon, at least as far as the genre 'novel' is concerned. I have already alluded to the risk of blasphemy inherent in Fielding's new creation in that he is mocking the divine creation in producing his works of fiction. This risk can be broadened to influence the nature of the canon itself. By *misplacement*, in this particular context, I mean a creative act which threatens the stability of art both intratextually and intertextually, in order that art may indeed not merely mirror life but celebrate it in all its variability. Fielding's work becomes, then, an example of how imagination rather than prescription actually forms that body of work continually reframed and re-imagined as canonical. It is a means to express the notion quietly proclaimed by Hass that:

> In the shadows of our critical heritage, we can now make a new judgement: a new judgement, and yet by no means a new concept. What if we suggest, as this new judgement, an old term all too familiar?:

> Imagination[511]

For it is surely here that both our understanding of realism and its connotative partner, canon, share their critical roots. The active ingredient in mimetic and canonical misplacement is, then, the exercise of the imagination. Such an exercise removes from us the temptation to prescription both at the mimetic and canonical levels, and yet, at the same time, it provides us with a coherent assessment of multivarious 'worlds' intended by the novel form. Imagination, the practice of 'imaging' those created worlds, depends upon both a stable, but at the same time inevitably unique, perspective.

This appears to resonate with Robert Alter, who, in responding to structuralism's 'absolute extension of intertextuality', puts forward a three-tier approach to the

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[511] Andrew W. Hass, *Poetics of Critique* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2003), p. 29.

understanding of reality based upon the paradigmatic self-conscious novel, *Tristram Shandy*.[512] He describes these tiers as 'hyperconsciousness', 'illusion' and 'structure-making'. The first two of these tiers focus on the novel form itself, while the third turns the lens upon the role of the reader. By hyperconsciousness, Alter implies the 'sheer arbitrariness and conventionality of all literary means'; in other words, everything that goes into the production of the text that lies in front of us is perennially 'open'. The second tier, 'illusion' relates to the trick which is being played upon the reader as the 'action' in the novel is played out. The final tier, (which is akin to the first) points to the role of the reader as one who is implicated in the formation of the whole mimetic structure. Such a structure, itself, is also, inevitably, 'open'.

Alter's three-tiered approach chimes curiously with a trinity outlined by that pioneer of intertextuality, Mikhail Bakhtin. In his *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), he suggests that there are also three basic characteristics for the novel – 'stylistic three-dimensionality', 'radical change effected in the temporal co-ordinates of the literary image', and the 'zone of maximal contact with the present'. Given that Bakhtin is keen to ground this schema in a concrete socio-political context, namely the interaction between different language groups (polyglossia) in an ever-expanding world, one can see from Bakhtin's list that there appears a broader point of contact with Alter in that they share a common understanding of the fluidity of the novel as a genre. As Bakhtin, puts it:

> I am not constructing here a functional definition of the novelistic canon
> in literary history, that is, a definition that would make of it a system of
> fixed generic characteristics. Rather, I am trying to grope my way toward
> the basic structural characteristics of this most fluid of genres,
> characteristics that might determine the direction of its peculiar capacity
> for change and of its influence and effect on the rest of literature.[513]

The relationship between realism and canonicity is set in relief by the notion of misplacement – the deliberate use of the imagination to organise a text or texts in such

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[512] Robert Alter, *Motives for Fiction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 13.

[513] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 11.

a way as to promote both the world *in* the text and the world *of* the text. This exercise of misplacement recognises a fundamental principle put forward by Colin Falck who, in the conclusion of his assault against what he regards as the excesses of structuralist theory, baldly states: 'All reality is aesthetic.'[514] Our construction of reality, therefore, holds within it a canonical component in that there is a recognition of reality *as* a construct. Henry Fielding, in his novels, I would suggest, was more than aware of this aesthetic or canonical approach to the presentation of reality.

Revelation

The misplacement of both realism and canon in the narrative fiction of Henry Fielding, already leads us in a specifically theological direction — to the question of revelation. Given that both realism and canon find themselves misplaced, can we find a place for the notion of revelation in the fictional world? We are here confronted with an immediate problem; that is, how we can even comprehend, let alone define an understanding of revelation. As James Barr states:

> The real problem, as it seems to me, is that we have no access to, and no means of comprehending, a communication or revelation from God which is antecedent to the human tradition about him and which then goes on to generate that very tradition.[515]

Barr goes on to point out that the term *revelation* is not to be found in the Bible itself. Indeed, the serious study of the nature and extent of revelation is a relatively recent theological development, tracing its roots only as far back as the eighteenth century.[516] One significant reason for this was the, then, live debate concerning the extent to which human reason may be harnessed in one's apprehension of the divine. The Cambridge Platonists sought to defend what they saw as a 'divine sagacity' borne out of our relationship with God. In this schema reason appears expanded and is

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[514] Colin Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature: Towards a True Post-Modernism*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 170.
[515] James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985), p. 121.
[516] See F. Gerald Downing, 'Revelation', in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1990).

placed on a virtual par with faith. In Cragg's description, 'Faith anticipates and completes the findings of reason, and philosophy is the handmaid of religion.'[517] The question remained, however, if reason had such importance, what place was there for revelation? This was to be the battle ground around which the so-called deist controversy was to rage throughout much of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

If we turn now to Fielding, we discern a somewhat ambiguous position regarding the nature and extent of revelation. We find that Fielding uses the term *revelation* twice in *Tom Jones*. Looking initially at the second of these instances, we discover that it relates specifically to the deist controversy and involves a dispute between the religiously orthodox Thwackum and the philosopher, Square. The evil Blifil has released Sophia's beloved bird, Tommy, and in his attempt to retrieve the creature, Tom has fallen out of a tree into the canal. Both Thwackum and Square seek to praise Blifil for what they regard as exemplary behaviour. Each, of course, claim the credit as the sole sponsor of such a magnanimous spirit in releasing the bird, and it is at this point where the rift appears. For Square, Blifil's generous heart is related to his appreciation of the 'Law of Nature', while for Thwackum, the law of Nature 'is a Jargon of Words, which means nothing'.[518] Square responds by stating, 'If there be no Law of Nature, there is no Right nor Wrong.' Thwackum, in turn, accuses Square of being a deist or an atheist.

Here, then, the fundamental breach between the orthodox and the heterodox is laid bare. Fielding, in this exchange, has the major component of the debate in place. Revelation is, for the orthodox, the key component of the entire Christian schema. Without it, the theological superstructure collapses, and one is left with well-meaning but empty philosophical notions such as the 'Law of Nature'. Fielding, of course, is careful in his presentation to paint both combatants in a less than brilliant light. Their common vanity is in evidence throughout the external dogmatic discussion, and indeed, one can see, more than merely colouring the discussion, their demeanour actually informs as to how Fielding would seek the debate to conclude. But if such

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[517] G. R. Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 44-45.
[518] *Tom Jones*, IV.iv.106.

subtleties are lost on the reader, Fielding drives the point home when he introduces his most powerful weapon into this intellectual exchange – the ignorant Squire Western:

> 'Drink about (says *Western*) Pox of your Laws of Nature. I don't know what you mean either of you, by Right and Wrong. To take away my Girl's Bird was wrong in my Opinion; and my Neighbour *Allworthy* may do as he pleases; but to encourage Boys in such Practices is to breed them up to the Gallows.'[519]

What Fielding has set up as an intellectual spat, is torn apart by the deliberate placing of ignorance within the context of confident dogma. Elsewhere, Squire Western is represented as a coarse buffoon with little to recommend him, and it is for this reason that his remarks are all the more powerful. The twin towers of theological obfuscation and philosophical rationalism are demolished in this salvo by a man who knows little to nothing of either. We are thus left with the disturbing question, if Squire Western is right, where now for revealed religion or rational thought?

This question is before us when we examine the first occurrence of *revelation* in *Tom Jones*. Once again, *revelation* finds itself brought to the fore in the context of an argument. Captain Blifil, newly married to Allworthy's sister, Bridget, is critical of what he considers as Allworthy's 'fault' in adopting 'the Fruit of Sin', i.e. Tom. To do so, he argues, was to countenance the act of sin itself. Captain Blifil backs up his criticism by resorting to a number of biblical quotations, and to refer to the legal status of bastards arguing that:

> 'Tho' the Law did not positively allow the destroying of such base-born Children, yet it held them to be the Children of No-body; and that, at the best, they ought to be brought up to the lowliest and vilest Offices of the Commonwealth.[520]

Allworthy's response is uncharacteristically severe. He indicates his own ability to interpret the Scripture by systematically demolishing each of Captain Blifil's points.

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[519] *Tom Jones*, IV.iv.106.
[520] *Tom Jones*, II.ii.54.

However, his concluding remarks are of most interest when he departs from a strictly exegetical analysis and speaks of what he describes as, the 'first Principles of natural Justice', facing Captain Blifil with what he regards as the consequences of his own argumentation:

> 'But to present the Almighty as avenging the Sins of the Guilty on the Innocent, was indecent, if not blasphemous, as it was to represent him acting against the first Principles of natural Justice, and against the original Notions of Right and Wrong, which he himself had implanted in our Minds; by which we were to judge, not only in all Matters which were not revealed, but even the Truth of Revelation itself.'[521]

This latter remark spells out for us the ambivalent attitude Fielding adopts towards the nature and reach of revelation. From the above, it would appear that some form of natural justice innate in the human psyche, at the very least, enables us to attune to what the Revelation requires of us. But Allworthy seems to go further in that this very capacity allows us, not simply to agree to, or acquiesce with revelation, but to actively interrogate it. Allworthy's remarks, here, chime well with those of the self-publicist and deist (though loyal member of the Church of England) John Toland (1670-1722), who, in his *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), wrote:

> Firstly, no Christian Doctrine, no more than any ordinary Piece of Nature, can be reputed a Mystery, because we have not an adequate or compleat Idea of whatever belongs to it. Secondly, That what is reveal'd in Religion, as it is most useful and necessary, so it must be as easily comprehended, and found as consistent with our common Notions, as what we know of Wood or Stone, of Air, of Water, or the like. And, Thirdly, That when we do as familiarly explain such Doctrines, as what is known of natural things (which I pretend we can), we may then be as properly said to comprehend the one as the other.[522]

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[521] *Tom Jones*, II.ii.54.
[522] John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, ed. by Philip McGuinness, Alan Harrison & Richard Kearney (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1997), p. 60.

Without delving into the nature and extent of the deist controversy,[523] it is enough for us to recognise that, in Fielding, *revelation* is not the secure foundation upon which he wishes to base his approach to the divine and by extension to human nature itself. Can we, however, take a step further back in this particular discussion and ask the deeper question as to how Fielding's fiction offers us not simply a forensic understanding of revelation but an experience of it?

One can begin to answer this question by noting immediately that in Fielding's fiction generally and in *Tom Jones* in particular, the nature of the novel is about continuous revelation. It is in the nature of comedy to point toward this kind of gradually revealed truth. There are stock moments and characters who provide us with an alleviation of the tension that is built up over the course of a novel as to such things as identity, social status, marriage prospects etc. However, important though this is, once again we are here merely recognising the structural characteristics of plot. Structure, by itself, may be an indicator of revelatory capacity of a novel, but it does not provide us with the understanding or experiencing of that revelation. To reach this level, we must take a step behind structure and look at language itself.

Paul Ricoeur has sought to respond to the question of how a work of fiction can offer a genuine revelation, in presenting what he describes as the 'revelatory function of poetic discourse'.[524] Ricoeur argues that there are three components to such a discourse. Firstly, writing provides us with the material we are dealing with, the *issue* of the text, as Gadamer puts it. In other words, we are opened to the text and only the text. Authorial intention has no part to play in our assessment of the revelation that the text has to offer us. Likewise, the reader cannot be said to confine the horizon of the text, which stands autonomously. Secondly, the nature of the particular writing has a role to play. The genre or style of the text provides, what Ricoeur calls, the 'work of the text'. Lastly, there is what Ricoeur describes as the 'world of the text', which corresponds not with any intention of the author, structural feature, or indeed reception by the reader. This 'world', rather, 'lies beyond the text as its reference'. By means of this three-fold basis, Ricoeur is suggesting that we can move towards what

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[523] See my comments above in the Chapter: 'The Art of Blasphemy' and, more briefly, in the Conclusion.

[524] Paul Ricoeur, 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation', in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 99.

he describes as the revelatory function of poetic discourse. Prior to reaching this goal, Ricoeur teases out for us the poetic function insofar as it impinges upon language and its ability to encounter the world. It is this particular activity which breaks down the hegemony of traditional understandings of truth. As Ricoeur states:

> That language in its poetic function abolishes the type of reference characteristic of such descriptive discourses, and along with it the reign of truth as adequation and the very definition of truth in terms of verification, is not to be doubted.[525]

Such an attack upon traditional empirical understandings of truth opens the way to discovering that poetic discourse is aimed at discovering something more significant, namely the 'emergence of a depth-structure of belonging-to amid the ruins of descriptive discourse'.[526] Recalling Aristotle's maxim that *mythos* is the way to *mimesis*, Ricoeur goes on to conclude:

> This conjunction of fiction and redescription, of *mythos* and *mimesis*, constitutes the referential function by means of which I would define the poetic dimension of language… In turn, this poetic function conceals a dimension of revelation where revelation is to be understood in a nonreligious, nontheistic, and nonbiblical sense of the word – but one capable of entering into resonance with one or the other of the aspects of biblical revelation.[527]

This revelatory capacity based on the autonomy, work and world of the text, illustrates for us the reality that truth is no longer about verification, but manifestation. In this respect, the revelatory capacity of poetic discourse (or, for our purposes, fiction), serves as a means to rescue the biblical text from any simplistic hermeneutical strategy which seeks to confine the text to a literal or other overly prescriptive interpretation. The paradox here is that it is this areligious sense of Revelation which allows the biblical revelation to, as it were, breathe, more freely.

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[525] Ricoeur, 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation', p. 101.
[526] Ibid., p. 101.
[527] Ibid., p. 102.

Ricoeur is cognisant of this and seeks to emphasise the particularity of the biblical revelation.

> Yet if this areligious sense of revelation has such a corrective value, it does not for all that include the religious meaning of revelation. There is a homology between them, but nothing allows us to derive the specific feature of religious language – i.e., that its referent moves among prophecy, narration, prescription, wisdom, and psalms, co-ordinating these diverse and partial forms of discourse by giving them a vanishing point and an index of incompleteness – nothing, I say, allows us to derive this from the general characteristics of the poetic function. The biblical hermeneutic is in turn one regional hermeneutic within a general hermeneutic and a unique hermeneutic that is joined to the philosophical hermeneutic as its *organon*. It is one particular case insofar as the Bible is one of the great poems of existence. It is a unique case because all its partial forms of discourse are referred to that Name which is the point of intersection and the vanishing point of all our discourse about God, the name of the unnameable. This is the paradoxical homology that the category of the world of the text establishes between revelation the broad sense of poetic discourse and in the specifically biblical sense.[528]

I have quoted Ricoeur at length here to establish as accurately as possible his understanding of the nature and extent of revelation. There are those who will bemoan Ricoeur's adoption of a philosophically grounded hermeneutic instead of, as one critic has put it, learning 'the simplest biblical truth about how to do philosophy: "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"'.[529] For such detractors, any notion of providing any 'natural' understanding of the way we experience revelation is merely an expression of human vanity. Though we may dismiss such rhetorical flourishes, in Wilder's terms, as an example 'of violating proper method by a prior dogmatic',[530] there are those with more serious concerns over Ricoeur's approach. For example,

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[528] Ibid., p. 104.
[529] Vern Sheridan Poythress, 'Review of Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation', *Westminster Theological Journal* 43/2 (spring 1981) 378-380.
[530] Amos Wilder, 'The Uses of a Theological Criticism', in *Literature and Religion*, ed. by Giles B. Gunn (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 41.

Nicholas Wolterstorff disagrees with Ricoeur's privileging of writing over speech. This he says, removes from us the active word of God in history, so that 'by the time [Ricoeur] has finished, divine speech has disappeared from view and only revelation of the manifestation is left'.[531] For Wolterstorff, if God cannot be heard to speak then the notion of revelation becomes emasculated.

Others, however, are aware of the consistency of Ricouer's hermeneutical project in his approach to revelation. Kaplan outlines Ricoeur's approach succinctly:

> The task of hermeneutics is not to discover an unmediated reality, but to continue to mediate reality through new creative interpretations. The mediating role of creative and imaginative interpretations is always at work in lived experience. In fact, it is not just my lived experience, but our entire social existence that is mediated by language, symbolic representations, and creative interpretations.[532]

Such a task means avoiding the extremes of ideology and utopia which are effectively means by which power may be exercised over others. As Mark Wallace states:

> Ricoeur avers that the *Heilsgeschichte* mindset that is borne by narrative is dangerous and seductive for a community that considers history a present-at-hand "possession" under its control. The danger lies in the community's confidence that its future is secure because it has the occult knowledge of the divine masterplan, and in its inability to acknowledge the discordant, the novel, and the chaotic, which always threaten to undermine its attempts to domesticate the divine identity through comfortable stories of sequential narrative coherence.[533]

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[531] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 62.

[532] David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 11.

[533] Mark I. Wallace, 'Can God Be Named without Being Known? The Problem of Revelation in Thiemann, Ogden, and Ricoeur', *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Summer, 1991), 281-308 (p. 298).

To carry out such an avoidance strategy, Ricoeur recognises that one must accept the limitations of human knowledge but, at the same time, that the very attempt to understand remains a human activity. The interpretative task, then, is carried out in the full knowledge of the aporetic nature of human existence. In other words, we continually interpret in and through an experience of frailty.

And it is here that we are returned to Henry Fielding and his works of fiction, for it is here that we find both an affirmation and a criticism of Ricoeur's approach to revelation. Fielding's desire to present nothing other than HUMAN NATURE provides the focus for this dual assessment. This presentation, I would argue, is an example of the revelation that Ricoeur has in mind. In Fielding's fiction we have, in Ricoeurian terminology, an autonomous work which presents us with a world. In this world we are presented with the truth which emerges from the conjunction of fiction and representation. We experience a revelation of human nature in all its muddied greatness and weakness. Fielding's fiction is an example *par excellence* of the traversing of that difficult hermeneutical path which seeks to reveal but not prescribe the human situation. So Tom, though he is chastised by theologian and philosopher alike, remains closer to the 'good nature' which Fielding describes as:

> that benevolent and amiable Temper of Mind which disposes us to feel the Misfortunes and enjoy the Happiness of others; and consequently pushes us on to promote the latter, and prevent the former; and that without any abstract Contemplation on the Beauty of Virtue, and without the Allurement or Terrors of Religion.[534]

Here we have encapsulated, not only the contrast between the frail Tom and his accusers, but also that between a frail hermeneutical strategy (a frail dogmatics) and a theological or philosophical desire for hegemony. For Fielding, we are to avoid contemplation of philosophy or the allure of religion/theology, not because they are intrinsically suspect, rather it is that the temptation of both is to prescribe and that such prescription has a tendency to ignore the very frailty upon which either discipline is unavoidably based.

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[534] Henry Fielding, 'An Essay On the Knowledge and Characters of Men' in *Miscellanies* Vol. I, 153-78.

But Fielding also provides a criticism of Ricoeur, insofar as his fiction indeed presents us with revelation at all. For all his desire to utilise an areligious sense of revelation as a means to support the biblical expression of revelation, nonetheless, Ricoeur appears to privilege that very biblical revelation above fictional expressions. As I have noted, he argues that the areligious sense of revelation cannot have anything to do with the religious meaning of the biblical revelation. We hear him speak of the biblical revelation as hosting a unique hermeneutic insofar as it intends to point to the unnameable, i.e. God. But surely the biblical revelation points to more than this unnameable. Is there not to be discerned in the biblical revelation another unnameable, namely Fielding's focus – human nature itself? It would appear that Ricoeur is constricting the very freedom he intends to advance in his hermeneutical approach.

Is it necessary for us to speak in terms of an areligious *sense* of revelation as opposed to a religious *meaning*? Does not the expression religious *meaning* clearly imply *revelation*? In short, can we make the areligious/religious distinction that Ricoeur wishes us to make? If this distinction is fragile, then perhaps we can recover a sense of revelation as less a prisoner of dogma, and more a universal human experience, which is discovered clearly in the texts of scripture but also in texts such as the novels of Fielding, which reveal the human condition in all its frail glory.

Fictional Transcendence – Fielding's Misplaced God

We are now led to a question which must be asked but which, of course, neither can nor should ever be fully answered: 'What is the nature of Fielding's God?' There is a sense in which, with all that has gone before, this question would appear more than a little superfluous. In the face of such glaring ambiguity and unfixity, how can we dare make the leap to access Fielding's notion of the divine? A simple and possibly Fieldingesque response might be, why not? For all the current desire in certain theological circles to move beyond an onto-theological stance, there is the danger that such a stance retains the very determinism it seeks to avoid. However, to ask the question as to the nature of Fielding's God, I believe, honours the ludicrous, comic search known as theology and it honours, too, the fact that it is in literature where this

God can be sought. In other words, in asking the question, we are faced with the awareness that there is nothing to lose other than a supposed secure, superior status. The truth is, the question can only be asked and answered in the shadowy light of human frailty, as Ricoeur has said:

> Naming God only comes about within the milieu of a presupposition, incapable of being rendered transparent to itself, suspected of being a vicious circle, and tormented by contingency.[535]

In the light of this, then, to answer the question: 'What is the nature of Fielding's God?' we must begin with, but not be sidetracked by, the historical spectre of deism. Much has been written concerning the nature of Fielding's approach to this particular theological phenomenon. There has been a particularly spirited debate between Martin Battestin and Ronald Paulson on this issue.[536] As I have already noted, deism was not as big a threat to the church as the orthodox portrayed it to be.[537] Nonetheless, as I have also shown, it does play a significant part in Fielding's fiction. However, this can be matched, not only by the presence of Enthusiasm, but also by several particularly rabid expressions of orthodoxy. Sheer weight of emphasis cannot be marshalled in Fielding's fiction to determine his position.

This has, inevitably led to a conflict of scholarly opinion. There are those, like Battestin, who regard Fielding as a typically staunch Anglican, and others, like Paulson, who see him as a critical or qualified deist.[538] Without going too deeply into the arguments by which these positions are arrived at, it is important to stress once again the determinism which colours both positions. Battestin and Paulson appear equally adamant that their particular assessment is the accurate one. But once again both are guilty of the sin of explicationism. In all their meticulous historical analysis, not only have they failed to agree, but they have, more fundamentally, failed to reckon with the fiction of Fielding as it is. For, as we have continually seen in this study,

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[535] Paul Ricoeur, 'Naming God', *Union Seminary Theological Review* Vol. 34, No. 4. (Summer, 1979), 215-227.
[536] See the rather barbed essay of Martin Battestin attacking Ronald Paulson, 'Fielding and the Deists', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 13, no. 1 (2000 Oct), 67-76.
[537] See the comments of Barnett on pp. 154-5.
[538] Ronald Paulson, 'Henry Fielding and the problem of deism', in *The Margins of Orthodoxy*, ed. by Roger D. Lund, pp. 240-270.

there is an aporetic element to literature which does more than question any specific doctrine, but has its source in what I have called *misplacement*, that is, a parting with the ineffable, and with it, any kind of security. The deism debate becomes, in this regard, something of a sideshow to the main event, viz. the ambiguous revelation and experience of the divine in Fielding's fiction.

Tentatively following Ricoeur, I have argued that revelation has a legitimate atheological basis. I have, however, moved beyond Ricoeur insofar as I have sought to show that there can be no justifiable separation between atheological revelation and religious meaning. The practical result of this, for our present question, is to recognise that the revelation of God in Fielding's fiction cannot be equated with either the deistic or orthodox positions. We are, instead, presented with a *misplaced* God. By this, I mean to suggest that, in his fiction, we encounter the divine as existing beyond those boundaries of the personal (exhibited most strongly in enthusiasm), or the impersonal (the basic deistic understanding). Rather, we encounter Fielding's fictional transcendent God – a misplaced God who is not there to confirm a doctrinal position or even more broadly, to provide an explanation for existence. This misplaced God is not the so-called 'God of the gaps', that is, a means to coming to terms with the unexplainable complexities of life. A description of this sort would merely perpetuate the prescriptive nature of such a God. The misplaced God, rather, reflects a view of life which is governed by a frail dogmatics and is thus continually opened toward the other. Bonhoeffer reflects this when he states:

> Life isn't pushed into a single dimension, but is kept multi-dimensional and polyphonous. What a deliverance it is to be able to *think*, and thereby remain multi-dimensional… We have to get people out of their one-track minds; that is a kind of 'preparation' for faith, or something that makes faith possible.[539]

For Bonhoeffer, to be polyphonous is to engage with the whole of life and thereby to genuinely encounter the other. (It also chimes with Ricoeur's notion of a 'polyphonous revelation'). This could well be considered a reiteration of Fielding's

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[539] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 311.

own desire in his fiction to show nothing other than HUMAN NATURE. It is in this encounter with the human condition in all its frailty that places before us the other. The experience of the novel reveals but does not constrain this encounter. What it does, as I noted at the beginning of this study, is open a space whereby both theology and literature in good, yet fragile faith, can speak a transformative word each to the other. In this respect, neither literature nor theology can claim any degree of hegemony. As Ricoeur points out, such a faith must have as its reference 'a culturally contingent network' which 'requires that this faith assume its own insecurity'.[540] Both theology and literature, then, as they inhabit this space, recognise their own vulnerabilities, and indeed it is in this very awareness that the transformative word can be spoken and heard.

This is, indeed, what happens when we read or listen to a story. The paradox of seeking revelation is that, as John Barton has noted, we actually discover ourselves by the story 'opening up to us the possibilities and the problems of being human in God's world'.[541] We can go further than this and suggest that,

> The possibility of turning to literature for insight into life rests, not on the closeness of good fiction to reality, but on the closeness of any reality we can grasp to fiction.[542]

This idea is further reinforced, albeit from a slightly different angle, by Jorge Luis Borges who writes:

> Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious.[543]

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[540] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 25.
[541] John Barton, 'Disclosing Human Possibilities', in *Revelation and Story*, ed. by Gerhard Sauter and John Barton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 54.
[542] Ibid., p. 55.
[543] Jorge Luis Borges, 'Partial Magic in the Quixote', in *Labyrinths*, p. 231.

We are, in a sense, returned here to Kant and his broad epistemological framework which leaves humanity 'making up a world'. Kant's schema, however, is borne out of a conviction that there can be no sensible revelation of God available to us. God, in Kant's thought, becomes a regulative principle which, precisely because it is supra-sensible can free us to act ethically. The problem with Kant's proposal is that, for all its apparent rational consistency, this is not the God we *want* to be revealed to us. Kant's framework is too precise; it attempts to provide us with an enlightened structure within which even experiences such as awe, ecstasy and adoration are subsumed into a constraining metaphysical matrix. However, it would seem to me that the God we look for, (if we look at all) is a complex, dare one say, messy conglomeration of parent, judge, lover, mother, father, creator, provider, sustainer, and much else besides. Indeed, whatever our hearts desire. In other words, the God we are looking for bears a close resemblance to the misplaced God found in Fielding's fiction.

This misplaced God can be found in fiction because, as Ricoeur has shown, following Heidegger, a text opens up a world to us. In being exposed to this world, we are freed from the necessity of prescription or dogmatic certitude. As Paul Fiddes suggests:

> Stories describe, not how things are, but how they might be. They point to
> a way of being beyond the greediness of ego, and so beyond the split of
> the consciousness between subject and object.[544]

Fielding's misplaced God, then, is to be understood as 'fictionally transcendent' in the sense that the space which is forged by theology and literature's common frailty leaves room for a God neither encumbered by dogma, nor anthropomorphised out of existence. As John Caputo has it:

> Far from being able to see God everywhere, the believer has perhaps the
> sharpest sense of all of the withdrawal of God. His absence from the

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[544] Paul S. Fiddes, 'The Fourth Gospel and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*', in *Revelation and Story*, p. 37.

world. His faith consists precisely in bending in the direction of the God who withdraws.[545]

In other words, God is imagined in this space. Such an exercise in imagination provides us with the fragile, yet hope-filled, common bond between theology and literature. It is this bond which, I believe, serves as a concrete extension of the thinking of Vattimo, when he writes that 'the God recovered in the postmetaphysical and postmodern epoch is the God of the Book'.[546] Vattimo's immediate frame of reference is the continuous spiritual re-interpretation of the history of salvation, and the place of Scripture within that tradition. However, I would argue that, in so saying, Vattimo opens the door to the possibility of that tradition being found beyond the Scriptural canon and into the broader literary corpus – the God of the Book is, at the same time, the God of the book.

Both theology and literature share in the comedy of human existence, and in the often futile, but always persistent, search for meaning. There are those who demur from this and insist that 'true Christian laughter stems from the conviction of absolute certainty'.[547] However, I would suggest that advocates of such an approach forget that this particular theo/logical hermeneutical circle can only be completed in and through fragility. The awareness of God's presence 'always caught up in the play of presence and absence'[548] forms a gossamer-like expression of this ever-circling, comedic dance. And, like most dancing, this dance takes two.

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[545] John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 279.
[546] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, p. 8.
[547] M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 300.
[548] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 280.

Conclusion

> I shall be very indifferent whether avowed Deists abuse me for having
> Religion, or Hypocrites for having none.

<div align="center">Henry Fielding[549]</div>

Fictional Theology

In this study, I have sought to forge a particular rapprochement between theology and literature. I have examined the work of Henry Fielding as a foil to the determinism which can so easily overpower both artistic spheres to their own detriment, and to the detriment of any mutually useful dialogue. At first glance, this may have appeared as an exercise in incongruity, given both the weight of critical study which has sought to define Fielding in a broadly prescriptive manner and, indeed, the very fact that, as a comic writer, one may see little scope in identifying any serious link with theology. However, it can safely be said that incongruity has been a key component to my investigation. In order to discern any areas of commonality, a sense of insecurity is required to ratify the integrity of the exploration. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) has said, 'The final wisdom of life requires not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and above it.'[550] That Niebuhr was speaking in the context of a culture which, he believed, in its very freedom, posed a threat to its own existence, offers us further evidence of the importance of our seeking for some kind of literary/theological rapprochement. However, as I read him, I have to demur from Niebuhr's assumption that we can somehow ever rise 'above' the experience of incongruity to some 'final wisdom'. As I have continually argued, any such rapprochement can only be forged upon the weak anvil of human fragility.

Niebuhr's anxiety regarding the critical state of cultural history is given a more explicitly theological dimension by Gabriel Vahanian. His assessment of the cultural paucity of Christianity is summed up tartly: 'The history of religion is the history of

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[549] Henry Fielding, *Contributions to the Champion and Related Writings*, ed. by W. B. Coley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 286.
[550] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1952), p. 54.

spiritual degeneration.'[551] In so saying, Vahanian argues that Christianity, through its descent from a gospel of liberty to an icy tradition has lost its first love, namely the iconoclasm which 'is a deflation of man's natural inclination to deify himself, or his society, or the State, or his culture'.[552] Whilst one may balk at Vahanian's somewhat florid style, his premise retains some validity because his broad thesis rests upon the assumption that theology and literature share a common goal, namely the renewal of human existence. It is this shared goal of iconoclastic regeneration that I have presented here.

To that end, I have investigated various key areas of experience which can be said to be of importance to both literature and theology. I have attempted to show that each of these areas is infiltrated by what I have described as *misplacement*. This misplacement expresses the continuous parting with the ineffable. This is evinced most clearly in writing, the artistic mode of both theology and fiction. For the work of theology or fiction is never completed, its hermeneutical path is never fully traversed. Yet, in the act of reading, this awareness of comic open-endedness, of the parting with the ineffable, of misplacement, serves as a fragile hermeneutical key upon the text of human existence before the other.

This sense of alterity is made movingly tangible in a closing scene from Richard Attenborough's film version of *Shadowlands*, the story of C.S. Lewis's relationship with Joy Gresham.[553] Lewis, played by Anthony Hopkins, answers his own question, 'Why do we read?' thus: 'We read in order to know that we are not alone.' This particular answer is somewhat ambiguous. For, in the very act of reading (except possibly for public recitation), we inevitably find ourselves alone. Reading is a solitary activity. And yet, in Lewis's response, we also discern a tacit awareness of the other. This knowledge of the other-in-solitude becomes another way of describing the experience of misplacement and is illustrative of the common hermeneutical strategy shared by both theology and literature.

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[551] Gabriel Vahanian, *Wait Without Idols* (New York: George Braziller, 1964), p. 21.
[552] Ibid., p. 24. One finds a similar sentiment in Julian Barnes where he writes: 'Religion has become either wimpishly workaday, or terminally crazy, or merely businesslike – confusing spirituality with charitable donations. Art, picking up confidence from the decline of religion, announces its transcendence of the world (and it lasts, it lasts! Art beats death!).' *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, pp. 244-5.
[553] *Shadowlands*, Dir. Richard Attenborough. Paramount. 1993.

On this basis, I have sought to release Fielding from the literary prison of socio-historical criticism in order that a broader, deconstructive approach may be applied to his fiction. This breakout being accomplished, we found ourselves free to explore the contemporary theological and literary implications of works which, paradoxically, due to their historical importance, can, all the more powerfully, serve to show the significance of this liberated approach.

As a consequence, I have studied the nature and effect of Fielding's comedy as a first step towards glimpsing this continuous parting with the ineffable. I have sought to show that, in many respects, Fielding's comedy does not follow the well-trodden comic path upwards to the happy ending, as had been traditionally understood. Fielding, while acknowledging his debt to the likes of Aristotle and Aristophanes, breaks free from any formulaic approach to comedy, seeking instead to forge his own iconoclastic path and offer us a more ambiguous form which, as Walter Allen succinctly put it, 'seeks to show the age its face'.[554] One means to achieve this, for Fielding, was his re-working of parable. Such re-visioning explodes hitherto well-accepted securities that traditional stories such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan were believed to provide. The joke, in this case (as, indeed, in the original parable), serves to comically unsettle all those who, in one way or another, exhibit the human trait known as affectation.

Similarly, in our examination of Fielding's work, we are confronted with his subversion of the epistemological framework which allows us to assume some measure of control over our existence. More than this, Fielding undermines the entire creative process, leaving us wondering about what is real and what is not. The critical outworking of this is that both the literary and theological universes, existing as they are in a creation built on words, are thereby also subverted and left not only less secure, but at the same moment, increasingly aware of their interdependence. Fielding levels the playing field between the two, leaving them bound by a common fragility.

More specifically, in Fielding's fiction we are brought to a greater understanding of the somewhat tortured relationship between the word and the Word. The boundaries

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[554] Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 63.

by which the territories of fictive and factual writing are traditionally demarcated become, in Fielding, comically blurred. Such blurring ultimately extends even to the Bible being regarded as, in some sense, fictive, and his own work considered as popular scripture.

The practical outworking of all of this is that, at both a critical and ethical level, hitherto secure frontiers are also misplaced. Criticism itself is discovered to be a work of art and, following from this, theological assessments, which are themselves defining, or critical acts, and as Kaufman has suggested, 'works of the imagination',[555] must be similarly regarded. To this end, notions of what constitutes blasphemy are to be considered at best provisional insofar as at both etymological and practical levels, the word remains ambiguous.

In the same way, ethical considerations are opened beyond the narrow confines within which both convention and dogma have so often sought to restrain them. Terms such as Prudence and Providence are equally undermined by Fielding in such a way as to allow us the freedom to see them in a brighter theological and literary context. Justice, too, is affected by this deconstructive approach and in Fielding's fiction we are to reckon with the uncomfortable reality that justice is at the mercy of narrative, and, as a consequence, criminality becomes a more diffuse appellation. This is because, in the novels of Fielding, we are exposed to a narrative which, as Johnson puts it, 'mingles good and bad Qualities in their principal Personages, that they are both equally conspicuous.'[556] Johnson, of course, saw this as a major weakness in Fielding's fiction. For my purposes, however, he unwittingly points to exactly the quality of human frailty, that potent admixture of rough and smooth, good and evil, which serves as the necessary fuel for the artistic fires of both literature and theology.

Further, I have investigated the theological and literary connotations of key concepts such as mimesis and, by extension, canon. I have sought to show that, through the application of misplacement, the understanding of both can be expanded beyond

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[555] Gordon D. Kaufman, 'Theology as Imaginative Construction', *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 50, No. 1. (March, 1982), 73-81.
[556] Paulson & Lockwood, eds., *Henry Fielding: The Critical Heritage*, p. 231.

hitherto traditional assessments. Each can be said to inhabit a more open space that allows for continuous interaction rather than mere prescription.

Finally, and building on the above, I have examined the fundamental issue of revelation and the nature of God itself. In the same way that our understanding of canon is liberated, so, too, we can view the fiction of Fielding as offering us a world from which genuine revelation can be found; a revelation which does not privilege a single, unique hermeneutic, but, instead, recognises and celebrates its own polyphonous nature. This misplacement of revelation, when applied to God, reveals to us the role that imagination plays in our apprehension of the divine. God is regarded as 'fictionally transcendent', in that God is imagined in the space wherein we allow the artistic word which is shared by theology and literature to be spoken without prejudice.

In bringing my study to a close, it is instructive to glance at James Wood's recent study on laughter and the novel which begins thus: 'Comedy, like sex and death, is often awarded the prize of ineffability.'[557] By this, he suggests that, as I noted in my second chapter, any definition of comedy and its effects can appear more than elusive. His choice of the word ineffable, however, obviously chimes with our major theme. Demurring from the fatalism surrounding the analysis of the nature and purposes of comedy, Wood proceeds more positively to define what he calls a 'comedy of irresponsibility', which he locates chiefly in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction. The comedy of irresponsibility, he argues, has its roots in the tension that exists between religious and secular comedy. This particular tension is outlined by Wood:

> If religious comedy is punishment for those who deserve it, secular comedy is forgiveness for those who don't. If correction implies transparency, then forgiveness – at least, secular forgiveness – implies deliberate opacity, the drawing of a veil, a willingness to let opacity go free.[558]

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[557] James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (London: Pimlico, 2005), p. 1.
[558] Ibid., p. 6.

This 'willingness to let opacity go free', I would suggest, is another way of referring to what I describe as parting with the ineffable. What is interesting, once again, is that Wood, like Hitchens at the beginning of this thesis, brings in a contrast between the religious and the secular in order to develop his understanding of the role of literature and, specifically in Wood's case, comedy. However, unlike Hitchens, Wood has a more sophisticated understanding of the religious sensibility. For Wood, the term 'religious' means 'the dream of transparency, the victory of knowing over the haze of unreliability, the existence of a stable system of human categorisation and a certain odour of didacticism'.[559] Granted that this is no ringing endorsement, it does, however, illustrate well for us an awareness of the temptation in the theological realm towards a 'metaphysics of presence'.

Again, unlike Hitchens, Wood also recognises the critical threads which mesh literature and theology together. He makes the comment that 'religious comedy does not write its will to secular comedy and then expire'.[560] Moreover, he points to the fact that secular comedy is by no means immune to the very didacticism which can plague the religious. In short, Wood seems amenable to some form of mutual understanding between literature and theology insofar as each can be susceptible to the same temptation to determinism.

Though in sympathy with Wood's general approach, what I have been arguing in this study is that, not only is the 'comedy of irresponsibility' to be found earlier than Wood appears to suggest, i.e., in the work of the eighteenth-century novelist, Henry Fielding, but that comedy itself is a positive constituent element of both the novel and theological reflection. Instead of irresponsibility, then, solely being a mark of the instability expressed in the so-called modern or postmodern novel, it is also to be found in what I have described as a 'frail dogmatics' – theological reflection which takes seriously the ludicrous nature of the human condition.

Both fiction and theology, then, share the same literary and psychological basis in human frailty and both straddle the treacherous path between being and non-being. To this extent, fiction can be regarded as theological in the same way that theology can

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[559] Ibid., p. 13.
[560] Ibid., p. 12.

be seen as fictive. Each is like the other, for each is an endless, fragile interpretative act. Further to this, we can see that all of us, religious or otherwise, live in a story-world that must in some way be *read*. The rise of the novel (prior, even, to Kant's exposition of the subject), points to this disturbance in the otherwise secure epistemological firmament. The telling of the story points to our own lives as fragile stories to be related and in some sense understood. In so telling, we are confronted with the loss of the pure 'ego', the definitive self – the mark of the modern. This entire unsettling process (what Caputo might describe as 'the theology of the event'),[561] is the experience of parting with the ineffable and it is shared, willingly or unwillingly, by both literature and theology as they, fallibly and fictionally, share in telling the human story.

Richard Holloway offers his own idiosyncratic perspective on this when he writes:

> One of the consolations of literature is the way it transmutes the tragic comedy of life by *noticing* it. The same can be said of existential religion. The genius of a sane religious sensibility is the way its myth-making keeps the balance between tragedy and comedy, pessimism and optimism, the former saving us from the intoxicating dangers of utopian thinking, the latter saving us from the despairing immobilism that denies any possibility of hope.[562]

Holloway's point is that it is in the *noticing* of the vicissitudes of life rather than in the determination to prescribe that life, which marks out the activity of both literature and theology. Further, when we recognise that one of the root meanings of the verb *to notice* is 'to celebrate', then our sense of the continuous parting with the ineffable as a means to entering a hope-filled space becomes all the more acute.

Coming full circle, and having suggested in my Introduction that the neo-orthodoxy Barth propounded served as a potential antagonist to the kind of rapprochement this study has sought to foster, there remains, paradoxically, a suspiciously deconstructive and hopeful opening in his dramatic understanding of humanity caught, as it were,

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[561] John Caputo, 'Spectral Hermeneutics', in *After the Death of God*, pp. 47-85.
[562] Richard Holloway, *Between the Monster and the Saint*, p. 133.

between finitude and infinitude. Barth's astonishing description of the resurrection in his *The Epistle to the Romans* well illustrates this:

> The Resurrection, which is the place of exit also bars us in, for it is both barrier and exit. Nevertheless, the 'No' which we encounter is the 'No' – of God. And therefore our veritable deprivation is our veritable comfort in distress. The barrier marks the frontier of a new country, and what dissolves the whole wisdom of the world also establishes it. Precisely because the 'No' of God is all-embracing, it is also His 'Yes'.[563]

This could be Derrida speaking with a Swiss-German accent. The serious point is, of course, that, despite appearances, there appears room, even in the Barthian schema, for the kind of openness to the other that is indicative of the mutual frailty endorsed in this study. Indeed, in this regard, Graham Ward is led to state:

> It seems to me that Barth has the potential to present a radically orthodox voice that is genuinely postmodern and, therefore, post-secular – a voice we need in the turmoil of today's nihilistic indifference.[564]

Such optimism, I believe, can apply, more specifically, to the relationship between literature and theology. The novel, as I have shown with reference to Henry Fielding, exhibits those areas of human concern which are shared by a theology that refuses to bow to any form of determinism and is, itself, open to the other. Equally, theology's recognition of its own artistic and, indeed, fictive status, frees us to discern the theological significance of the novel form. In this sense, both literature and theology, though distinctive, are joined in a common, comedic strategy that is never complete. The production of art is a natural outcome of the joyous frailty of the human condition and, in this production, whether it be theology or a work of literature, there is a continual, flawed coming to terms with parting with the ineffable. If there is a common thread between theology and literature, it is that neither can ever be

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[563] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 38.
[564] Graham Ward, 'Barth, modernity and postmodernity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. by John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 293.

ultimately prescribed. Both are bound by an ineffable hermeneutical cord which is unravelling even as it binds.

Does my study, then, provide the rapprochement I have been seeking? Have I succeeded? The difficulty in responding to such a question is that, in so answering, we fall into the same deterministic trap which we have been at pains to avoid. Success in this sense is always a failure, for it merely succeeds in perpetuating the system-ridden structures that serve as battlements behind which each may find security from the other. The cost of parting with the ineffable is that those defences are breached leaving us with the play of interpretation that defies ultimate closure. In his development of what he describes as a 'hermeneutics of love', Alan Jacobs suggests that the temptation to consistently provide a 'correct' interpretation does not necessarily serve us well:

> One seeks to avoid error because one cannot love properly when confused or deceived. However, the avoidance of error – like attentiveness to authorial purposes – does not in itself achieve anything of intrinsic worth.[565]

Error is the bogeyman of modernist interpretation. In our release from the constraints of unrelenting determinism, however, we finally realise that error, *as* bogeyman, does not exist. Error is the by-product of frailty, and in the same way that frailty cannot be avoided, neither too can the capacity to err. This is not to say that we must not strive towards a reading but that such a reading cannot ever be considered free of error. In this sense, every reading becomes a 'wandering' in the plain sense of 'erring'. Every reading then, can be considered, like Tom Jones, a 'foundling', insofar as it exhibits that instability of character and waywardness of purpose which forms the fragile essence of Fielding's famous protagonist. To err is, indeed, human.

Success, then, we must be aware, can be a politically loaded term. By now, one would have recognised that any notion of success must, like all else in the present study, be misplaced. In this regard, it is vital to acknowledge that this thesis, too, must submit

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[565] Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2001), p. 17.

itself to the cultural space. It cannot sit outside. If it remained so, it would be a mere apology for the course I am suggesting. In order to offer its word, it too, must find itself misplaced. What, then, does misplaced success look like?

We could do worse than look at St Paul's definition in his second letter to the Corinthians, that misfit group who exhibited much that marked the frailty of the human condition, and who, indeed, could fit very well into the pages of a Fielding novel:

> We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems, but never despair; we have been persecuted, but never deserted; knocked down but never killed; always, wherever we may be, we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body.[566]

It is no surprise to discover from this exercise in theological irony that, according to Fielding, '[St. Paul's] Writings do in my Opinion contain more true Wit than is to be found in the Works of the unjustly celebrated Petronius'.[567] In the passage above, we are confronted with the success of the downtrodden. It is the topsy-turvy success of the Christian clown who sees joy in despair and life in death. It is just such misplaced success that I would wish for this current project. It is a means for us, at last, to get the joke regarding the word and the Word and all that this entails. For, it is in the weakness rather than the power of the word that we reach for one another. It is in the folly of the word rather than the wisdom of the word that we find ourselves in the sacred space. It is in the misplacement of the word that we find the word which just might communicate.

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[566] II Corinthians 4. 8-10.
[567] Henry Fielding, *The Covent Garden Journal*, No. 18 (March 1752), p. 125.

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