

Fielding, Reception Theory and Rationalism: A Reply to Brean Hammond and Nicholas Hudson*

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Brean Hammond and Nicholas Hudson have provided most interesting comments on my "Reader Participation and Rationalism in Fielding's *Tom Jones*," and I am happy to join them in critical debate. Their arguments, whether concerning Iser or Fielding and whether in accordance or at variance with my own, provide a welcome opportunity to review the situation, which I will now do beginning with the points of agreement in Hammond's response.

The first concerns the opposition of Fielding and Richardson in Iser. Surely Fielding, far from giving the reins to the reader, keeps directing him fully as much as Richardson does, in spite of (or rather by way of) those mysterious "gaps." The theoretical fallacy of such empty spaces left for active, artistic reader participation, as well as Iser's failure to meet Fielding's irony is discussed by Hammond not in theoretical terms but by way of a fine interpretation of the "statue of surprise"-passage in *Joseph Andrews*. Making Fielding's text speak for itself, Hammond shows how Fielding achieves the characteristic structural irony of his style and how far the intended effect does, indeed, depend upon the reader. The argument is rounded off by taking Iser, too, at his word in order to demonstrate that the freedom claimed for the participating reader is only freedom with a vengeance, not unlike the "audience-participation" in the theatre of the 1960s, which also proved fallacious if taken over-confidently.

*Reference: Lothar Černý, "Reader Participation and Rationalism in Fielding's *Tom Jones*," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 137-162; Brean Hammond, "Mind the Gap: A Comment on Lothar Černý," *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 72-78; Nicholas Hudson, "Fielding and the 'Sagacious Reader': A Response to Lothar Černý," *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 79-84.

At this point enter Terry Eagleton and disagreement. To my mind the crude dichotomies of social realism (and related aesthetic ideologies) are even less reliable than the "gaps" of reader-response theory when it comes to meeting an author about to say "Call me Ishmael." Having gone so far in the way of making confessions, I may as well add that I also find I cannot agree with Brean Hammond's theoretical position defined at the end of his reply. I believe, indeed, that the knowledge which is the end of reading is "already contained, on some level, within the text itself." It is precisely because the ideas are in the text that we can engage in the process of understanding, bridging the gap between a text of the past and the presence of reading.

I feel particularly grateful to Brean Hammond for his challenge to consider once more the question of rationalism in Locke as a hermeneutic principle which helps elucidate Fielding's "Sagacity." Hammond asks whether Locke, whom he rightly sees as a representative of the school of British empiricism, can be regarded as the goal of Fielding's opposition to rationalism. Of course, strictly speaking Locke cannot be identified with Cartesian rationalism. I would argue, however, that by Fielding's time, the difference between these schools had become fairly indistinguishable.

Locke recognized that apart from "sensation," "reflection" was an irreducible form of experience; but though he grounds knowledge in sense perception Locke is far from being a radical empiricist. The sharp distinction between rationalism and empiricism does not do justice to Locke's psychology of knowledge. For Descartes all empirical reality was included in the notions of the mind; Locke, however, by looking at the creation of ideas, wants to explain the working of the mind. He is not so much interested in the metaphysics as in the psychology of knowledge. The importance he attributes to intuitive knowledge, e.g. in *Essay* Bk. IV, would be hard to explain otherwise. In "Of Reason" he moves beyond pure empiricism in order to establish certainty of knowledge without presupposing innate ideas. It is also obvious that Locke tries to ascertain the validity of rational knowledge in spite of the fact that ideas have a root in experience.

As Brean Hammond sees my argument contrary to most accounts in the history of philosophy I would ask permission to quote from Ernst

Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, well knowing that this means carrying "owls to Athens." Cassirer states that "Even Locke's empiricism reveals a deliberately 'critical' tendency."¹ This applies, in my view, not only to Locke's empiricism but to eighteenth century empiricism in general, which survived, more or less, as a mere guise of rationalism. In view of the status the *Essay* enjoyed, Fielding could have a point, therefore, against Locke as a representative of the rationalist thinking he objected to. When Fielding makes Mr. Square argue from first principles this does not sound very different from Locke starting with simple ideas. And considering the semantic context of Fielding's *leitmotif*, "Sagacity," which in *Joseph Andrews* includes "doubt" (I.xi.40), "Understanding" (I.x.37), and the frequent use of "judicious," "curious" etc. the link between Fielding and Locke does not appear arbitrary.²

The interesting point raised by Brean Hammond is indeed: What kind of reader of Locke was Fielding? Equally interesting might be the question what kind of reader Fielding was in the first place and how *he* regarded the process of reading, a question I will be dealing with in a forthcoming article.

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While Brean Hammond questions rationalism as the object of Fielding's attack, Nicholas Hudson's criticism is concerned with the conflict of 'reason vs. feeling.' This gives me a welcome opportunity to go into that subject once more, stressing the fact that I did not want to replace "reason" by "sentiment." In other words, I do not think that the question is "head or heart" or the alternative "to feel more and to think less." What, actually, I wanted to show is that Fielding objects to an unqualified belief in reason. Sagacity which has no ironical connotations in Locke's *Essay* is now seen in the light of comic epic, i.e. of affectation arising from vanity or hypocrisy.

It does not seem contradictory to me that this persiflage of sagacity is presented, in Fielding's novels, in essentially "sagacious" or reasonable terms (Hudson rightly points to the highly rhetorical character of Fielding's style). The underlying pattern very much resembles the old humanist ideal of *nosce te ipsum*, reason holding the mirror up to

"reason," showing "virtue her own feature, scorn her own image," and all this without overdoing it, within the bounds of comic epic.

The passage from *Hamlet* just quoted might perhaps help to clear up a difference of opinion concerning "the great difficulty of judging correctly." I wonder if Hudson really sees judgment in Fielding in a merely rational light. To me it seems not so important whether from our contemporary perspective characters like Adams, Allworthy or Heartfree can be seen to lack proper judgment; the salient point is that Fielding (alias the narrator) never makes us feel superior to Squire Allworthy even though his judgment is shown to be anything but flawless. The only judgment really called in question in the novel is that of the reader. He is made to be wary of his own judgment, if the use of the word "Sagacity" is anything to go by.

To sum up: Iser interprets Fielding in the literal manner, and overdoes it: the reader really is supposed to be sagacious. To Hudson, Fielding reminds the reader "of both the need and the great difficulty of judging correctly." It seems to me, however, that we are not invited to judge whether Fielding is for or against rational judgment but to see how he tries to make his aim of moral teaching efficacious. This actually was Iser's criterion in comparing Fielding and Richardson but, unfortunately, without appreciating the irony which allows Fielding to evade Richardson's didacticism. Fielding adheres to this strategy even when advocating the innate wisdom of the heart. The sentence Hudson quotes, "Examine your Heart . . . thoroughly, my good Boy" (887) gently pokes fun at Mr. Allworthy's preaching habit, but does not discredit the role the heart has to play in judgment. For Fielding, who is indeed an accomplished rhetorician, teaching goodness of heart is inefficient, but not the having it. Therefore he can be ironic even about his most treasured value.

Fielding, like Richardson, wanted to teach. But while Richardson drifted towards tragedy, Fielding used the (gently) distorting mirror of comic epic. Comedy being all-inclusive in its method, necessarily includes the reader. What Fielding wants him to see in the *speculum consuetudinis* is an *imago veritatis*. Therefore, rather than condemning reason Fielding makes use of it—and encourages the reader to do so—in the interests

of the more comprehensive virtues summed up in the master-word 'heart'.

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NOTES

¹Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1951) 93; see also 99.

²The ironical use of "Sagacity" from *Joseph Andrews* to *Tom Jones* seems to me a rather strong indication that Dr. Johnson's "neutral" definition (to which Brean Hammond refers) hardly does justice to Fielding's irony.