

“But the poet . . . never affirmeth”:
A Reply to Bernard Harrison*

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Professor Harrison has honoured me with a very long and substantial reply. Discussing my article and the responses of Professors Hammond and Hudson conjointly, he has written much more than a mere reply. He has given us, in fact, a theory of reader response which he, rather too modestly, claims to be a modification of Iser’s theory only. Before I enter into this discussion, however, I would like to answer a charge which I regard as relating exclusively to my article.

In Harrison’s view I keep reanimating the old question whether Fielding belongs to the camp of the sentimentalists or the moral rationalists and—what is worse—voting for the first. Now, what I really wanted to do and, as far as I can see, have done, is proving this dichotomy to be inadequate because I share Harrison’s view that it is “a distinction which, ultimately, he [Fielding] escapes” (170) or, in my own words: “Fielding does not simply exchange the absolute rule of reason with that of sentimentality” (157). Harrison’s very pertinent analysis of the role of the “Good Heart” in relation to its counterpart “worldly wisdom” is—if I am not presuming too much—not far from mine.

In the face of this seeming disagreement I would like to discuss a topic which may have caused the misunderstanding, perhaps because I have not made myself clear enough. Therefore this is a most welcome opportunity to explain in greater detail the significance of Fielding’s

*Reference: Lothar Černý, “Reader Participation and Rationalism in Fielding’s Tom Jones,” *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 137-62; Bernard Harrison, “Gaps and Stumbling-Blocks in Fielding: A Response to Černý, Hammond and Hudson,” *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 147-72.

rationalism or rather anti-rationalism and—arising from this—Iser's concept of the reader and the reading process in Fielding.

My starting point was the use of the word "sagacious." It is an undisputed fact (1) that Fielding uses this synonym of "rational" ironically, (2) that Iser did not take notice of the irony and turns the reader into someone who is meant to use his own wits to fill in the gaps Fielding explicitly left in the text. I wanted to keep the "rational" or "sagacious" reader in perspective, in other words to show Fielding's "rational reader" in his or her fitting ironical light. If this entitles Fielding to the predicate "anti-rationalist," it certainly does not do so in any strictly philosophical sense. To the contrary, I wanted to make it very clear that Fielding is much too rational, too much of a dialectical rhetorician to fall into the trap of sentimentalism.¹

Perhaps it may help to stress a fact not hitherto mentioned though probably uncontroversial. Fielding is not a moral philosopher, whether of rationalist or sentimentalist leanings, even if he uses the vocabulary of the moral discourses of his time. He is a poet providing his readers with images which "possess the sight of the soul" as Sidney puts it in his *Apology*.² His characters owe their lives not so much to ratiocination as to imagination. And what they (always including the *persona* of the narrator) have to say is not ruled by the law of contradiction, because "the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth."³ Now, though as images the characters are not identical with philosophical abstractions, they are not at all lacking expressive energy. On the contrary, the main purpose of poetry in this idealist tradition is to move the reader or spectator to goodness, because it "yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul."⁴

Considering that Fielding is a writer of fiction I would hesitate to call him a follower of some clearly defined school of thought. Consequently I never argued that Fielding, following the lead of, let us say, Hume, reduces morality to sentiment. I rather think that Fielding raises before the eyes of the mind an *altera natura* which, reduced to the level of abstract ideas, would have to be interpreted by way of complex or even dialectically opposed principles. This is why "Goodness of Heart," far

from being opposed to reason is, in fact, the very quintessence of all the virtues a writer of fiction ought to possess, including "Judgment" and "Learning":

Nor will all the Qualities I have hitherto given my Historian avail him, unless he have what is generally meant by a good Heart, and be capable of feeling. (IX.1.494)

Even on a quasi-theoretical level, then, Fielding does not subscribe to the alternative: rationalism or sentimentalism.

I find myself in absolute agreement with Harrison that Fielding provides his hero, not with sentiment or even sentimentality, but with an ability to put himself imaginatively in another person's place. I have called this empathy, not sentiment. Like Harrison I regard Tom as a character who sympathizes with the people he likes; he has enough imagination to put himself in the position of someone like Black George or—very differently and even more importantly—Sophia. I am quite convinced of Harrison's telling genealogy of the latitudinarian type of virtuous appetite (160), but not completely so. Although this view certainly corresponds to what Fielding says, for example, about love (IV.1), I cannot quite agree with Harrison's suggestion that Tom "has matured by the end of the novel" to prudence, which he considers "a name for the rather impressive combination of self-committing goodness of heart, sound judgment and self-control" (160).⁵ I am not sure that *Tom Jones* already belongs to the genre of *Bildungsroman*. If or when Tom reaches prudence, he does so not "actually" by way of learning or maturation, but symbolically by marrying Sophia.⁶ Tom's prudence is nothing but a hope and promise. The fulfilment of both is the union with Sophia.

Now to Harrison's main point of disagreement with me: the issue is whether such an arguable reading of Fielding as Iser's invalidates the theory which it is supposed to prove. My objective is not so much disproving Iser's theory of reading but calling in question his interpretation of Fielding. That does not necessarily invalidate his theory though it is, of course, a moot point how far a theory can be convincing which does not really meet its chosen empirical subject. Harrison thinks

that I have gone too far because "some of Iser's claims are detachable from any such dependence [on his reading of *Tom Jones*]" (148). As I "neglected" those aspects and parts of Iser's theory which Harrison finds acceptable, my interpretation is supposed to remain "within a system of categories and conceptual distinctions . . . whose influence Fielding was most concerned to combat" (148). Even if this were so (but *vide supra*) it surely would not follow from ignoring some aspects in Iser, since my own approach is historical while Iser's is not.

By way of developing his own theory of reading, Harrison discusses Fish's disagreement with Iser's view of gaps in the process of reading. This opens a field of discussion which is not quite congruent with my own. Where Iser believes to discover gaps in the text—more or less as given—Fish sees everything happening in the reader: "there is no distinction between what the text gives and what the reader supplies; he supplies everything" (150). Iser's own construction of gaps seems to corroborate Fish's remarks up to a point. To discover a gap between Allworthy's moral perfection and his inability to perceive the hypocrisy of Captain Blifil is not a gap in the text but in the interpreter's mind. "They are gaps between the text and the noema undergoing constitution in the reader's mind" (Harrison, 150).

I wonder whether Sidney's idea of the otherness of poetry compared with moral philosophy might not come in here once more to help solve the problem of Mr Allworthy's goodness in the Fish-Iser discussion. The quarrel whether his goodness contradicts his ignorance of the true character of the Blifils, is an example of a discussion among moral philosophers which would provoke Sidney's satire. Why on earth should "virtue" be compromised by "errors" of judgment or lack of knowledge of the ways of the world? Harrison's criticism of this debate seems too mild rather than too astringent to me (153).

Harrison, by contrast with Fish establishes a kind of latitudinarian ethics in *Tom Jones*, in other words a historical and doctrinal frame of reference, an idealized type of "Vorverständnis." For some readers this may lead to a discovery of contrast, for others it may be an affirmation of their own convictions. After all, Fielding was not an original latitudinarian thinker. For that reason it is not quite easy to follow Harrison's assumption that this awareness amounts to an experience of "tensions

between text and expectation" (161). I do not see why it necessarily amounts to "subversive pressures" (162) whose impact Harrison turns into a definition of serious reading. Fielding's ethical code was certainly different from that of the admirers of *Pamela*, but his ideas were not without precedence. I am not sure, therefore, that Harrison's admittedly fascinating digression into the history of ethical thought is a suitable starting point for another theory of reading alongside with Iser's. As it seems to me, Harrison's historical approach has little in common with Iser's deductive reasoning.⁷ Harrison is less of an Iserian than he himself wants to believe. His mode of reading is more or less identical with the hermeneutical situation of existing within a language and a community of shared beliefs. The experience of novelty within the framework of one's tradition is altogether different from such a speculative concept as Iser's theory of reader-participation.

When it comes to Harrison's comments on the tension between author and reader as regards "goodness" it is again the definition of poetry which makes for a certain tension between Harrison's position and my own. In his view Fielding has made it his business to contradict moralists like Hawkins to whom good does not mean what is desirable but what is "not bad." I quite agree that such an idea of goodness is just not good enough, i.e. not complex enough for Fielding. But, as it seems to me, what he aims at (as do poets in general) is not so much contradicting or rather differentiating simplified notions but rather to provide a reading experience including fear and pity as well as delight and laughter, involvement even to self-forgetfulness and intellectual detachment, sentiment and irony . . . Surely, if weighing contradictions would be a reader's office, he or she would soon be weary of it.

Likewise Harrison's argument that Mr Allworthy's goodness is to be regarded as "a counter-weight to Richardson's Puritan optimism concerning the efficacy of inward virtue in transforming the human world" (157) seems to fit into the context of moral philosophy rather than poetry because it appreciates Allworthy as a separate entity. But in the novel he has no such kind of existence. He is part of an overarching providential design which makes his failures of judgment quite unimportant and successfully blots out his shortcomings in penetrating the wickedness of Blifil and son. Surely Fielding's readers

were able to grasp this point of the workings of providence as quickly as the "contradiction" between Mr Allworthy's benevolence and his perspicacity. Isolating a single trait of a certain character like this means construing a philosophical, ethical or legal "case" rather than elucidating the organic whole of a work of art.

As to Harrison's final disagreement with me over the relationship between Fielding and Locke I beg to respond *more syllogistico*: Harrison charges me with quoting Locke as a target of Fielding's anti-rationalism. He doubts that Locke is a suitable target of Fielding's anti-rationalism because in the first half of the eighteenth century rationalism was closely related to Deism and Locke was regarded as an arch-partisan of Deism. According to the rule that, when two quantities are equal to a third one they are equal to each other, it follows from this that Locke the Deist must also have been a rationalist. Therefore Locke was a possible target of Fielding's anti-rationalism. So where is the reason for disagreement?

I would like to conclude on my favourite note: "the poet . . . never affirmeth," in other words: Fielding, the poet, was under no obligation to be philosophically consistent.

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NOTES

¹For Fielding's use of negatives see Jeffrey M. Perl, "Anagogic Surfaces: How to Read *Joseph Andrews*," *The Eighteenth Century* 22 (1981): 249-70.

²Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry or The Defense of Poesy*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (London: Thomas Nelson, 1965) 107, 116.

³*An Apology for Poetry* 123.38.

⁴*An Apology for Poetry* 107.13.

⁵I am also at a loss to follow Harrison's other example of Tom's sympathy: ". . . when his perception of Sophia's needs compels him to turn away from his desire to involve her in his downfall" (170). Did Tom ever have such a desire?

⁶Martin C. Battestin has drawn attention to the allegorical elements of this marriage in his chapter on "Fielding: The Definition of Wisdom," *The Providence of Wit* (Oxford: OUP, 1974) 164-92.

⁷For a similar criticism see the review of Iser's book on Sterne by Götz Schmitz, *Archiv* 228 (1991): 172-75.