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Fielding and the "Sagacious Reader": A Response to Lothar Černy*

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Few novels seem so well adapted to the strategies of reception theory as *Tom Jones,* which has elicited a rich and varied range of responses from that modern variety of the "sagacious Reader," the literary scholar. Lothar Černy's subtle and intelligent encounter with this novel is particularly valuable for its isolation of what has clearly become the central issue in reader-response criticism of *Tom Jones.* Does this novel address the reader's head or heart? Are we meant to learn how to exercise our faculty of discernment or "Sagacity," both as readers and as actors in the real world, or should we learn instead to listen to the dictates of the "good Heart"—to feel more and to think less? Placing these faculties in the balance, Černy finds the scale tipped in the direction of feeling, though he agrees that Fielding does emblemise the beauties of wisdom in the person of Sophia. In my scale, and despite Černy's interesting argument, the balance is still tipped towards judgment. I fully agree that Fielding set an extremely high value on the "good Heart" as a moral theorist. As a moral teacher, however—as a *rhetorician*—he realised the inefficacy of counting on the sentimental responses of a hard and cynical world.

The scholar who perhaps most embodies the "judgment" extreme in interpretations of Fielding is among the most insightful readers of eighteenth-century fiction, Wolfgang Iser. Černy's opening critique of Iser nonetheless reveals the naivety of trusting too implicitly, as Iser sometimes does, in Fielding's compliments to the reader's "Sagacity" or in his apparent anxiety that we exercise independent judgment. Iser

*Reference: Lothar Černy, "Reader Participation and Rationalism in Fielding's *Tom Jones*," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 137-62.

discounts the extent to which the reader—particularly the first-time reader—will inevitably *misjudge*. The reader becomes, indeed, a demonstration of the failure of the very "Sagacity" that the narrator seems to applaud so warmly. In book 1, chapter 5, for instance, Fielding makes one of his "appearances on Stage" to inform the reader of the "real" reasons for Bridget Blifil's apparently unaccountable kindness towards the infant Tom. The narrator insists that we must not expect such assistance in most cases. "This is a Favour rarely to be expected in the Course of my Work," for we must learn to think and judge for ourselves (47).[1] In this case only, therefore, the narrator favours us with the supposed revelation that Bridget wished merely to heighten Allworthy's feeling of obligation to her. As the second-time reader will see, however, Fielding has completely misled the reader in this episode. Tom is really Bridget's child. Even in urging the need to judge, in short, Fielding seems to be enjoying a private joke at the expense of his "sagacious" reader.

But do we conclude from this episode and others, as Eric Rothstein has, that our attempts to judge are therefore of "no importance," and that we are even wrong to regard *Tom Jones* as having a serious and consistent moral purpose?[2] This view, at the opposite extreme from Iser's, ignores the tremendous consistency with which Fielding focuses on failures of discernment as the primary source of danger in the world. Most of Fielding's meritorious characters—Adams, Wilson, Heartfree, Allworthy, Tom, Booth, Amelia—suffer because they fail to understand the wickedness and cunning of those around them. This suffering is, admittedly, more serious in some cases than in others: Adams merely looks silly as the result of his misjudgments, whereas Wilson, Heartfree, Booth and Amelia endure the genuine hardships and cruelties of the real world. It should be noted that the characters who suffer most in Fielding's novels are those who live in the *city*. Every time Fielding approaches the city, a tone of urgency enters his fiction, for here the normal consequences of misjudging are not merely a bump on the head, but financial ruin, moral depravity and the gallows.

In my view, therefore, it is quite wrong to conclude that Fielding became fully convinced of the need for strict morality and circumspection only in his last years, after he became a real-life judge deciding on

people's lives and deaths. By 1748, when he was elevated to the bench, Fielding had very little left to learn about the troubles of real life: he had been a Londoner since 1730, and a lawyer since 1740. The "serious" world of *Amelia* is clearly prefigured in *Jonathan Wild*, and in the interpolated stories of Mr. Wilson and the Man of the Hill. These stories are like windows, through which the reader glimpses a grimy and decidedly uncomic world that Fielding always *knows* is there, but which he has chosen, for artistic reasons, not to confront in all its chaos and ugliness. Even in the comic, idealised, pastoral worlds of *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, however, Fielding did not merely jettison his concern with the problems of judgment. In *Tom Jones*, especially, Fielding constructed a mode of narrative that constantly reminds the reader of both the need and the great difficulty of judging correctly. We see the consequences of bad judgment in the novel, and we to some extent discover our own failures of judgment as readers.

Lothar Černy does see that *Tom Jones* has a serious moral purpose. He is not among that numerous class of modern readers that prefers to see this novel as a facile comic romp, full of lewd jokes and jolly inns. I differ from Černy, however, in believing that the word "Sagacity" (like the associated word "Prudence") is not *simply* meant in a negative sense in every place in the novel. Unlike run-of-the-mill ironists, Fielding does not merely reverse meanings, so that words signify the opposite of what he says: his ironies have double, even triple layers. Moreover, the reader has plenty of opportunity in *Tom Jones* to make morally sound and factually correct judgments of a rational kind. One example will have to suffice. In a climactic incident in book 5, chapter 10, Blifil espies Tom sinking into the grass with Molly Seagrim, but does not tell Thwackum: "As to the Name of *Jones* he thought proper to conceal it, and why he did so must be left to the Judgment of the sagacious Reader: For we never chuse to assign Motives to the Actions of Men, when there is any possibility of our being mistaken" (258). The irony of this passage is complicated. As Fielding has established his role as an omniscient narrator, it is of course absurd that he should suddenly pretend to have less than certain knowledge of a character's motives. It is also absurd, surely, to suggest that we should "never" judge the motives of others unless we are absolutely certain—for there is *always* some possibility

of being mistaken. Indeed, the first-time reader will inevitably misjudge Blifil's motives to some extent: the neophyte reader cannot know that Blifil has now discovered Tom's true parentage, and is determined to get rid of him. Nevertheless, even the first-time reader will have a pretty good idea that his motives are unsavoury. As my more sagacious students usually determine, Blifil aims to divert the suspicion that he wants to incriminate Tom. Partly for this reason, he lets Thwackum make the fatal discovery of Tom and Molly.

Here is one of many places, therefore, where Fielding does count on the reader's judgment—even if, quite admittedly, the epithet "sagacious Reader" never *entirely* loses its teasing intonation. Fielding's irony, it should be noted, always counts on our capacity to look past what is said to some unstated meaning. In one major respect, I agree with Lothar Černy's critique of Iser. Our insights rarely involve merely a "filling in the gap," in the sense of inserting our own undirected imaginings. We are able to reach partially accurate conclusions about Blifil's motives, even when Fielding does not explicitly state them, because we are carefully schooled from book 3, chapter 2 onwards concerning Blifil's consistently selfish and devious character. Although Fielding goes to some lengths to *disguise* his manipulation of our judgments, he ensures through innumerable subtle tactics that we reach the appropriate moral conclusions.

This observation leads finally to my disagreement with Černy concerning the role of "feeling" in *Tom Jones*. Like many previous commentators, Černy points to Fielding's famous discussion of "Love" in book 6, chapter 1, as evidence that he counted on the reader's sentimental responses to make sense of the novel. "Examine your Heart, my good Reader," the narrator commands, and goes on to declare that if we do not find the impulses of generosity and compassion in our breasts, we might as well stop reading (271). But does Fielding seriously expect that a large portion of his readership will actually put the novel down at this point? Of course not. If we have read through five complete books, it is likely that we *already* "agree" with Fielding, and will keep reading. And in doing so, we confirm that we, too, are "good hearted" readers, members of the author's elite club of benevolent souls who know that "love" means more than "lust." This passage in book 6, chapter

1, is not merely a *déclaration de foi*—it is a bold rhetorical manoeuvre to confirm the reader in the opinions that Fielding wants us to hold.

I am not claiming that Fielding questioned the existence or the importance of the "good Heart." But he understood the world too well (even at the time that he wrote *Tom Jones*) to believe that the majority of his readers would melt with sympathy and love merely by being shown morally attractive characters in sentimental situations. Fielding was a much less sentimental novelist than Richardson, who was more inclined to depend on the sheer force of moral feeling and virtuous example. On the evidence of Fielding's fictional worlds, he believed that the majority of people are certainly capable of sympathy, but generally consult self-interest first, and are strongly influenced by class prejudices and sexual appetite. I have argued elsewhere that Fielding's benevolent characters, such as Allworthy and Tom, usually get nowhere when they try to appeal to the spontaneous goodness of their auditors.[3] In one episode, in book 17, chapter 3, Allworthy even asks Blifil to "Examine your Heart . . . thoroughly, my good Boy" (887), dramatising the naivety of those who assume that their own warm sentiments will always be duplicated in the breasts of others. Fielding, who was far from such naivety, realised that people like Blifil were dangerous precisely because, unlike many good people, they were efficient at controlling the opinions and emotions of others. This ability stemmed not from shared sentiments, but from their covert utilization of self-interest and all the strategies of rhetorical manipulation.

Fielding's own recourse to these strategies reveals, of course, a major paradox in his moral outlook. In setting out to convince his readership of the existence of real, disinterested virtue, Fielding deployed persuasive arts comparable to those of his villains. He appeals more often to our vanity than to our benevolence and, while giving us the impression that we are feeling and judging on our own, is usually manipulating our reactions. *Tom Jones* is, in this way, a highly "rational," "prudent" and "sagacious" book: it is the novel crafted for a cynical world by a deeply committed idealist. It is the work of a man who still believed that the capacity for love existed in the hearts of most people, and who thought that laughter can be a route to moral knowledge. But Fielding was also

convinced that, in a fallen world, even saints must learn the wisdom of the snake.

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NOTES

[1]All quotations refer to the Wesleyan edition of Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, ed. Fredson Bowers, introd. and commentary Martin C. Battestin, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1974).

[2]Cf. Eric Rothstein, "Virtues of Authority in *Tom Jones*," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 28 (1987): 112.

[3]Cf. my "Fielding's Hierarchy of Dialogue: 'Meta-Response' and the Reader of *Tom Jones*," *PQ* 68 (1990): 177-94.