

Henry Fielding as a Sceptic Optimist: Reading *Tom Jones*

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In *Henry Fielding and the Language of Irony*, Glenn W. Hatfield explains how critical Fielding was on the state of language in his own time. According to Hatfield, Fielding wrote several articles on the corruption of language: *An Essay on Conversation*, *Jonathan Wild* (both of them are in the *Miscellanies*, 1743), and “Modern Glossary” in *The Covent Garden Journal* (January 14, 1752), to name a few. He was worried not only about the corruption of language but also about that of society. He found some correspondence between them: “There is a strict Analogy between the Taste and Morals of an Age; and Depravity in one always induces Depravity in the other” (a letter of Fielding’s, quoted in Hatfield 4).

Criticising the corrupted language and society, Fielding frequently used irony. A typical example can be found in the “Modern Glossary”. This is a precursor to Flaubert’s “Dictionary of Accepted Ideas”, introducing the fashionable meanings of such common words as “Honour”, “Great”, “Wisdom”, etc. Fielding’s definitions are, of course, usually ironical. For example, he defines “Great” as “applied to a Thing, signified Bigness; when to a Man, often Littleness, or Meanness”. This definition reminds us of *Jonathan Wild*, which also describes Wild (or the work’s satirical target, Robert Walpole) as “Great”. With the ironic usage of words, Fielding satirises the corruption of words and society at the same time.

In *Tom Jones*, we can point out many examples of irony directed to moral corruption. When Fielding describes Blifil as “prudent” for example, he ironically warns us how often hypocritical people seem to be virtuous. Moreover, Mr Allworthy, who cannot recognise the natural goodness of Tom’s character, orders him to leave his house (Book III, Chapter 11). Mr Allworthy is easily deceived by Blifil and blames Tom that he got drunk when Mr Allworthy was ill in bed. But actually Tom was drunk then because of the pleasure to hear that Mr Allworthy had got out of danger. Tom’s good nature does not indicate him the way to prove his innocence against this dishonour contrived by Blifil. Reading the story of the novel in a larger scale, moreover, we can summarise it as the correction of misrepresentation of the two protagonists, namely Tom (the real successor to Mr. Allworthy) and Blifil (the fake one). As long as they are misrepresented, the descriptions of their characters naturally sound ironical.

As to Fielding’s criticism on language, Hatfield finds a great influence from John Locke’s philosophy: “Locke was standing behind Fielding’s attitude towards language from the very outset of his career” (26). He also points out, quite understandably, the influence from Swift’s use of irony. When he says, however, that “Swift’s irony, it may be freely admitted, is more profound and more complex than Fielding’s, more deeply rooted in a philosophical awareness of the disparity between the ideal values...and the grim reality it is made to stand for” (156), we have to stop to consider whether Fielding is less profound than Swift or he has a different idea of language than Swift.

Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* was published in 1690. According to

Locke, “[W]ords, being sounds, can produce in us no other simple ideas, than of those very sounds; nor excite any in us, but by that voluntary connection, which is known to be between them, and those simple ideas, which common use has made them signs of. He that thinks otherwise, let him try if any words can give him the taste of a pineapple, and make him have the true idea of the relish of that celebrated delicious fruit” (Locke 380; Book III. iv. 11). Thus he pointed out the arbitrary connection between words and ideas, and then many English writers tackled this problem. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, such writers as Defoe, Swift, and Addison insisted on the foundation of the language academy that would forcibly stabilise the English language.

We can read Swift’s *Tale of a Tub* (1704) from this context. In order to show the instability language is suffering from, Swift inserts many digressions from his text named “A Tale of a Tub”. These digressions become longer and longer, until they expel the text from the book. *A Tale of a Tub* ends without finishing the “tale”. Thus he deliberately destroys order in the composition of his own work. We can understand the ironical fact that this anarchic work is a production of Swift’s quest for order in language. In order to reveal the poor state of modern writing, he shockingly presents the chaos itself and makes the reader see the need of correction.

There is a striking contrast, therefore, between the composition of *A Tale of a Tub* and that of *Tom Jones*. Contrary to Swift’s chaotic style, Fielding deliberately constructs a symmetrical building in prose. At first, we may tend to think that Fielding is more optimistic than Swift in his recognition about the state of verbal corruption. If we compare their ideas of language, however, we shall notice that it is not so simple. As we saw just now, Swift was one of the proposers to establish the language academy in order to solve the problem shown (but not at all solved) in *A Tale of a Tub*. He thought that there could be a solution to the problem. In *A Tale of a Tub*, too, we can see Swift’s firm belief in the solution. The “tale” in *A Tale of a Tub* tells a story of three brothers. Their father has left them the will that contains useful instructions and precepts. But the brothers, anxious to break the father’s law, make a series of absurd interpretations of the will, though “their father’s will was very precise, and it was the main precept in it with the greatest penalties annexed, not to add to, or diminish from their coats one thread without a positive command in the will” (Swift 38). Here the coat signifies, according to the book, “the Doctrine and Faith of Christianity, by the wisdom of the divine Founder fitted to all times, places, and circumstances” (34). Swift’s program to establish order in language (and, as the passage above suggests, order in society as well) was basically the restoration of the old authority symbolised by the father’s will. And we can understand the father’s will without difficulty (for it is so simple, as is shown in the passage above), unless we yield to the temptation to digress from it. All we need is, therefore, some authorised organisation that would supervise and rectify people with frail mind.

Fielding was sceptic about the attempt to stabilise language and society in such a way. In his *Essay on Conversation* he talks about the emptiness of conversation between modern people, but he does not think we can make any improvement to this poor situation, because “The truth is, we live in a world of common men, and not of philosophers” (quoted in Hatfield 12). This means that the philosophic ideals of language are hardly understood by “common men” and that the improvement through the language academy is unrealistic. Fielding depicts the use of language by “common men” in *Tom Jones*, and the problem of communication expressed there suggests another reason why he does not approve the idea of language academy. In the world of

Tom Jones, misunderstandings do not arise from the human tendency to escape from order so much as from the uncertainty of the medium that delivers words. The adventure of Tom would not start if the letter from Miss Bridget were delivered to Mr Allworthy without interception; Tom is put into the prison after the duel with Fitzpatrick because of the witnesses who distort reality; as to Tom's dishonour, Mr Allworthy is deceived by the false report from Blifil and his tutors. In all cases, neither the judge nor Mr Allworthy wants to digress from the truth. Their fault in the last two cases only lies in their credulity and over-belief in their ability of judgment. In the world of *Tom Jones*, language will be inevitably distorted if it is used. The cause of distortion and corruption does not lie in language itself but in its use in society. Therefore, the problem of language is too large for anyone (even for the man called "Allworthy") or any organisation to solve.

Swift deliberately destroys the style of his work because he believes in the ideal state of language that we can realise if we reject the present state. In Fielding's case, however, he does not consider the ideal realisable, though he keeps it in his mind. He is sceptical both about the real state of communication and the improvement of it. This recognition leads him to the acceptance of reality, without showing the better world that is realisable. It is not unnatural for Fielding, then, to show the good possibilities found in the status quo. This is why Fielding seems to be optimistic in *Tom Jones*. Tom must be understood and marry Sophia in the end, through the mysterious power called Providence. Optimism does not always collide with scepticism; rather they sometimes complement each other in the ironic recognition and acceptance of reality.

It does not necessarily mean that we may define or describe Providence itself. The optimism in *Tom Jones* is rather based on agnosticism. If we imagine any higher order or Providence that is working above the corrupted society in the novel, it will just end up with presenting another code of morality, which cannot be absolute in Fielding's sceptic world. It seems that some scholars like Glenn Hatfield, Martin C. Battestin, and Irvin Ehrenpreis⁽¹⁾ are falling into this trap. Battestin for example considers *Tom Jones* "the work that...may be taken as the consummate achievement" (Battestin *Providence of Wit*, viii) of England's Augustan age, "an age whose cast of mind saw the moral drama of the individual life enacted within a frame of cosmic and social Order, conceived in the then still compatible terms of Christian humanism and Newtonian science" (141). In the Augustan age, people lived, or believed to live in the world that is "created by a just and benevolent Deity whose genial Providence governs all contingencies" (141). There is a harmony between an individual and God if s/he acquires Prudence, "Order in the private soul" that corresponds to Providence, "Order in the great frame of universe" (142).

When we read the text of *Tom Jones*, however, we cannot but see the fact that there are as many unfortunate happenings as fortunate ones. Battestin does not neglect this aspect of *Tom Jones*. As if answering our question, he introduces us the lesson told in *Amelia*:

I question much, whether we may not by natural Means account for the Success of Knaves, the Calamities of Fools, with all the Miseries in which Men of Sense sometimes involve themselves by quitting the Directions of Prudence, and following the blind Guidance of a predominant Passion; in short, for all the ordinary Phenomena which are imputed to Fortune; whom, perhaps, Men accuse with no less Absurdity in Life, than a bad Player complains of ill Luck at the Game of Chess.

(Fielding *Amelia*, 16; quoted in Battestin *Providence of Wit*, 177)

Quoting this passage, Battestin insists that bad accidents in Fielding's novels do not deny the existence of Providence. He regards the happy ending of *Tom Jones* as proving the superiority of Providence to Fortune or the malicious goddess inflicting misfortune to good people. Tom becomes happy because he has gained Prudence through hardships. Bad accidents are miraculously contrived to make Tom live a decent life as a man of Prudence. Then, so-called Fortune turns out to be none other than Providence. I admit that there are passages supporting this idea of Providence in *Tom Jones*, but I still think that Battestin only sees one aspect of this novel. For example, we should not miss the fact that Blifil does not change his mind to the end: "[Blifil] lives in one of the northern Counties, about 200 Miles distant from London...in order to purchase a Seat in the next Parliament...He is also lately turned Methodist, in hopes of marrying a very rich Widow of that Sect, whose Estate lies in that Part of the Kingdom" (979 - 80). Nevertheless, he is financially supported by Tom and Sophia: "[Blifil] hath yielded to the Importunity of Jones, backed by Sophia, to settle 200 *l.* a Year upon him; to which Jones privately added a third" (979). Thus, vice survives, and Tom and Sophia's treatment to Blifil cannot be called prudent, especially because he is going to be a politician. Mr Allworthy has warned Tom about this beforehand. When Tom pleads the mercy for Black George, who has concealed Tom's bank notes, Mr Allworthy preaches: "Child, you carry this forgiving Temper too far. Such mistaken Mercy is not only Weakness, but borders on Injustice, and is very pernicious to Society, as it encourages Vice" (969). Therefore, the conclusion of the novel does not confirm the absolute power of Providence; neither does it mean that Tom comes to be completely prudent. In this ambiguous conclusion, we can see Fielding's ironic attitude as a novelist. He does present us a happy ending, but he cannot help blotting it with some dark symptoms.

Though more cautious than Battestin, Hatfield also presents a moral code that seems to rule the world of *Tom Jones*. According to him, it is not Tom but Sophia who "is the model of the kind of prudence" recommended in *Tom Jones*: "She is thoroughly good and innocent, but unlike Allworthy and Jones she sees through Blifil from the very beginning" (Hatfield 183). Contrary to Tom, Sophia is not at the mercy of Fortune and goes out of home to seek the distressed hero. Hatfield calls her virtue "active virtue", and insists that the kind of prudence Fielding recommends in *Tom Jones* is effectual when she is to defend that virtue against the malicious world: "Fielding's confidence in Sophia's purity of soul...allows him to excuse her a measure of deceit in the prudent interests of arming her virtue against the more practiced and cynical cunning of Mrs. Western and Lady Bellaston" (187). Hatfield emphasises on the importance of Sophia as she is the only character in the novel who acts according to her virtuous judgment and is not fooled by malignant people. She is even ready to deceive others in order to defend her virtue. Hatfield sees Fielding's realism in the characterisation of Sophia: "[In] the real world [Fielding] is trying to describe, the good in any case must acquire some craftiness of the bad if they are to survive in that world. The point is, however, that Sophia, in so doing, never really compromises her purity of soul, and she is deceitful, unlike Blifil, Mrs. Fitzpatrick, Mrs. Western, Lady Bellaston, et al., only in self-defence" (187).

We agree with Hatfield in that Fielding's realism can be seen in his description of Sophia, but our interpretation is totally different from Hatfield's. It is doubtful, at first, that Sophia "sees

through” Blifil and Tom. Though she loves Tom and rejects Blifil, it is not necessarily because of Tom’s virtue. If we oppose Tom’s “true” virtue against Blifil’s “false” virtue, we have to invent a moral code that seems to be recommended in the novel. However, the world of *Tom Jones* does not permit, as we have seen, the true code in any possible way. As Fielding declares that he does not live in “the world of philosophers”, we should not be philosophers in our interpretation. We cannot agree with Hatfield, moreover, when he defends the calculative character of Sophia as prudence. Without doubt Sophia is not calculative in the same way as Mrs Bellaston, but Sophia does not become happy through prudence. The scene of Tom’s proposal to Sophia is nothing but the gradual defeat of Sophia’s prudence.

After the revelation of Blifil’s plot and Tom’s true identity, Mr Allworthy offers Mr Western and Sophia a marriage between her and Tom, instead of Blifil. Sophia rejects this new offer, however, saying: “At present there is not a Man on Earth whom I would more resolutely reject than Mr Jones; nor would the Address of Mr Blifil himself be less agreeable to me” (956). It seems that she cannot forgive Tom’s libertinism. Though Allworthy and Tom once gentlemanly give up the offer, Squire Western encourages Tom to stick to the proposal. When he turns up to her to ask for forgiveness and marriage, she makes an answer that is typically prudent: “Time...Mr Jones, can alone convince me that you are a true Penitent, and have resolved to abandon these vicious Courses...I think I have been explicit enough in assuring you, that when I see you merit my Confidence, you will obtain it. After what is past, Sir, can you expect I should take you upon your Word?” (972). She does not trust Tom’s oath of sincerity without the touchstone of time. In *Tom Jones*, moreover, time is certainly presented as the most reliable thing in the corrupted state of language and society. For example, time seems to reveal Blifil’s malignance and Tom’s good will as well as their true identities to the insensitive world. It also reminds us that Battestin explains the work of Providence through time.

Tom effectually subverts Sophia’s (and some critics’) reliance on time in the subsequent conversation:

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’s 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... (973)

Frivolous as it sounds, Tom’s answer is actually ontological. While Sophia resorts to the revealing power of time, Tom shows her nothing but her own figure, or her blindness to her self. The self shown here is not the philosophical agent of judgment but the simulacrum that Sophia’s penetrating mind has neglected or dismissed. It is none other than this superficial thing, however, that assumes to judge Tom’s sincerity. Sophia blushes owing not only to Tom’s fervent admiration but also to the awareness of her pretension to be a perfect judge in the unreliable society, of which she is a member. In the end, we cannot surpass agnosticism. The world of *Tom Jones* rejects deism as well as optimistic theology.

Reconciling the heroine with the hero, Squire Western degrades Sophia's prudence: "All the Spirit of contrary, that's all. She is above being guided and governed by her Father, that is the whole Truth on't" (975). Though we cannot trust his words as they are, there is a piece of truth in his blaming Sophia's amour propre. Moreover, to admit the authority of the unreliable Father matches the design of the novel we have discussed. Sophia attains happiness not through prudence but through resignation. This is not a reactionary claim of the paternal authority but sceptic tolerance of the world as it is.

To conclude this essay, we would like to quote a passage by another sceptic optimist who was a contemporary with Fielding:

Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas; and through the powers and forces, by which the former is governed, be wholly unknown to us; yet our thoughts and conceptions have still, we find, gone on in the same train with the other works of nature. (54)

This is not taken from Shaftesbury, Cudworth, or any other optimistic philosophers or theologians. It can be found in David Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*.⁽²⁾

Notes

- (1) Though we do not talk of Ehrenpreis' reading of *Tom Jones* this time, we can see his optimistic interpretation of the novel in his book called *Fielding: Tom Jones* (London: Edward Arnold, 1964).
- (2) Fielding had a copy of this book (first published in 1748 under the title of *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*) in his library. See Battestin *Henry Fielding: A Life*, 677, note 170.

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