QUEST FOR COMPLETION: THE WANDERING CHARACTERS OF FIELDING'S *TOM JONES*

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Abstract

The present essay was originally a paper presented at a scholarly conference in San Francisco[2] (2014). It is part of a longer series of discussions of the mode in which very long novels strive to replicate integrally the social and natural cosmos. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (18th century) endeavors, the critic argues, to reconstitute an idyllic universe, a modest copy of the Garden of Eden.

Keywords: *18th century novel*; *H. Fielding's "Tom Jones"*; *very long novel*; *the idyll*; *religion and literature*.

This paper is part of a continuing project[3]. A first section was presented in Paris, in July 2013 (XXth ICLA Triennial Conference). The project's general

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[2] The conference "Faultiness of Literature and Religion: New Contexts for Religion, Ethics, and Literature", June 2014, San Francisco State University.

[3] The *Tom Jones* text used is taken from the handy and reliable version edited by John Bender and Simon Stern, Oxford University Press, 1996. No critical study known to me deals with the issues outlined in my short essay. However a number of critical works, some more general, others more specific have proved useful and I have learned from them. I will mention some, although, undoubtedly there are others: Huet 1670, von Lukacs 1920, Palmieri 2003, Watt 1957, Hunter 1990, Doody 1996, Starr 1964, Israel 2002, Engell 1999, Gillespie/Engel/Dieterle (eds.) 2008, McKeon 2000, Battestin 1974, Paulson 1967, Smallwood 1989.

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argument is that there are a number of "very long novels" the purpose of which is to replicate cosmic Creation as a whole (natural, social, ethical). The novels of this kind can be divided in several categories. Among these "very long novels" I enumerate novels of picaresque movement, novels of individual growth, social community novels and others yet. One category among these comprises novels founded on the authors' conviction that immanence can replicate transcendent creation by (re-)building an idyllic society.

Here I will deal mostly with one novel, emblematic for the "idyllic walk", namely with Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, which I regard as an outstanding example of this kind. Its action is placed in an imperfect world, but one that seems to aspire toward a restored paradisiac condition. I am aware that we should also pay attention to a number of other prose works (longer or shorter) that are in many ways akin to *Tom Jones*. Some of these will be mentioned somewhat briefly at the end.

I will begin by pointing out that here I am not engaged in the examination of the interface literature / religion in *Tom Jones*, although this was and has remained an under-studied issue and although it is quite fundamental for a full grasp of Fielding's intentions and style. To provide just one example, it should be said that the binary opposition Tom Jones / Blifil is an echo and variant of recurring Biblical situations: Cain and Abel (Gen IV, 2-16), Esau and Jacob (Gen XXV, 20-XXXIII, 20), perhaps most obviously and significantly the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke, XV, 11-32). Such echoes have to be placed in the context of Fielding's pointed reserves and mocking critiques of institutional and dogmatic churches, which in turn is counterbalanced by similar reserves and ironies vis-à-vis rationalist secularism. Other parallels of this kind would deserve attention: Tom Jones as a Moses-like foundling (Exod II, 2-20), the author and narrator as "Creator", the God-like features of Squire Allworthy and so on. But, as I said, it is not my intention to dwell upon these.

Rather, my purpose is to sketch out the construction of the Cosmos by the innocent, imperfect, but basically good individual. Tom Jones as a teenager and a very young man is a "man without qualities" (*Mann ohne Eigenschaften* – close to Musil's sense). He is classless, origin-less, devoid of organic attachments, of modest knowledge, even more modest in his judgments of his environment and of the human world surrounding him. He relies on physical and athletic prowess, as well as on spontaneous instincts, on a basic natural kindness and virtue. In some ways he can be described as a "noble savage". Tom Jones' imperfections are also eloquently presented. He is impulsive and undisciplined. His energetic and, in fact, unselective eroticism prevails over all his options or quests for virtue, piety, and sentimental attachment. Perhaps most important however are Tom's glaring gaps in cognition and information. Indeed, ironical as it may seem, the first eighteen or twenty years of Tom's life are sheltered, his horizons are limited to a minimal slice of land in the county of Somerset and to

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a minimal section of the earth's inhabitants. Diversity is practically unknown to him. The outside world is *terra incognita*.

The brutal and unexpected jolt that propels him outside this tiny social island makes him unhappy perhaps, but above all leaves him flabbergasted, disoriented. Tom Jones will from now on be engaged in a process of cognition and of construction.

The readers are invited to stop here for a moment and to ask themselves a key question. Who is the world-constructor in the novel? The narrator or else the title-character? The question is not easy to answer. On the face of it, we have an omniscient author, who at most, plays with the reader, withholding elements of information, communicating partially with us, in fact misinforming us occasionally, at least by suggestion or by incomplete clues. Nevertheless we find that the center of the narrative world is Tom's mind and soul, his grasp of sensations, images, facts, and patterns that he gradually encounters, accumulates, or has to put together constructively. Perhaps the most plausible way to describe the formula of the novel is to say that the author / narrator functions as a guide and enveloping protector of the slow, largely disorganized cosmos-construction work of the main character.

In any case, the early years of Tom Jones are spent in what could be described as an imperfect idyllic world. In a very superficial way we may get the impression that this is a paradisiac environment, at the center of which we find a benevolent deity-like figure (Book I, chapter 2, chapt. 4, chapt. 9; Book II chapt. 6, and elsewhere) who dispenses kindness and, seldom, mild punishments, more often well-intentioned admonishment and advice. Around Allworthy are grouped in successive circles relatives, friends, dependents, local inhabitants. Their existence is mostly static and predetermined. However, imperfection, vice, and sin slither their way into this pseudo-paradisiac environment. There are several levels of reality that the reader comes to discover step by step and there are faces and angles that become visible slowly, in time; these may change in radical ways the opinions and judgment that we have formed initially. Thus the Reverend Thwackum and Mr. Square, who were supposed to be complementary faces of humanist rationalism and religious piety are both very far from acting and being what they are supposed to be (Book IV, chapter 4 offers one of their disputes).

There is not much difference between the faults of the poorer and those of the higher classes. "Black George" (Seagrim), a beneficiary of Tom's compassion, is in fact a blackguard and a treacherous thief. Squire Western is a simple, rather stupid, roughly-hewn individual; he is impulsive, violent, incapable of tender understanding, even though he is basically kind. His sister is pretentious, devoid of the sophistication and subtlety that she claims for herself. Bridget Allworthy cloaks her sexual indiscipline in hypocritical phrases and in empty gestures of piety and good manners. She has a child out of wedlock (from

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young Summer), as we find out at the very end of the narrative, and is happy in the short-lived married embraces of Captain Blifil (a gold-digger, somewhat brutal and fully mediocre) with whom she produces a second son.

Alas, in many ways the most imperfect of the group turns out to be Squire Allworthy himself, who despite his good intentions and unquestionable virtues is fully naïve and largely incapable of understanding the realities of his social environment. The world of the novel could be labeled a *deformed* Neo-Platonic scenario and model. The originating center is not one of perfection and unity, but is already seriously damaged. We have therefore to accept that the ensuing adventures are fully ***necessary***, in fact indispensable. The return to the originating center, here the evolutionary world-creation, is an operation of repair, correction and improvement, from a cognitive, as well as from an ethical point of view. A better world is constructed, as well as reconstructed or ameliorated.

This operation begins with an explosion triggered by both Tom Jones and Squire Allworthy. It is based to a certain extent upon misunderstandings or unintentional errors. Tom Jones genuinely loves Sophia Western, a love that is reciprocated. Nevertheless he engages in sexual actions with his old sex partner Molly Seagrim; even there he is chivalrous and tries to protect the girl's reputation against Pastor Thwackum and step-brother Blifil. He is truly worried by Allworthy's illness and grieves what he expects to be his protector's approaching death, but this is misunderstood and misrepresented by Allworthy's dependents and "courtiers". In turn Allworthy is all too quickly ready to believe these badmouthing vassals and all too fast prepared to blame Tom Jones' relatively minor peccadilloes. The conjunction of these sets of faulty information and interpretation will lead to the explosion and to the exile of Tom Jones, but also to the beginning of the world-construction and world-healing that is the essence of the narrative. We should be aware that an auxiliary and contributing factor is the irrational impulsiveness of Squire Western and the desperate confusions of his daughter: a persistent erotic attraction combined with disappointment and misunderstanding of her lover's behaviors. (Books V-VII)

It would be specious to pursue chronologically the adventures of Tom, Sophia, Squires Western and Allworthy, as well as of those surrounding them. The ensuing world-construction is not primarily comprehensible in diachronic or successive terms, but better as a structure, and also as a process of cognition. I will therefore confine myself to enumeration. The environment of the numerous and various "walks" is more often than not peaceful and delightful, most characters are benevolent, if flawed, their foibles and faults are relatively modest. The building bricks display broad diversity in terms of both social and moral outline.

Who are the truly *evil* figures? Ambitious envy and cupidity are features of Blifil; yet he does not go all the way to violence or cruelty, and when finally defeated accepts quietly his new status. Black George is a felon, but his

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environment explains to a good extent his character. Others, such as Squire Western, have smaller foibles: he is impulsive and thoughtless, but fundamentally kind-hearted. His sister is smug and pretentious, but not malevolent. Lawyer Dowling is shifty and cunning, but one can argue that in the end he "sees the light". Lady Bellaston is certainly unpleasant in all her unslaked sexual thirst and erotic intrigues, but we recognize in her background a kind of desperate desire for peace, normality, and quiet satisfaction. Others, such as Partridge, Square, Pastor Supple, and even Thwackum are more comical than outright disagreeable. This is not an infernal world, just a somewhat *imperfect* one. There is an important implication here: the human material with which the imitative world-constructor (whether Henry Fielding or Tom Jones himself) has to work and which he has to shape and heal is not excessively difficult or recalcitrant.

Now, as to the structures that gradually give form to the newly resurgent and improved social and natural cosmos; as I just said, they are likewise best recognized in a non-chronological enumeration. In as far as nature is concerned, not much improvement or additional building is required. The truth is that Somerset county provides ample zones and diversities of natural elements. We have wide forest areas, cultivated agricultural lands with rich harvests, rivers and ponds, extensive, even elegant gardens, affluent country-houses, as well as modern dwellings, along with a number of poverty-stricken shacks, wild and free animals in field and wood, but also domestic animals. Tom Jones is early on familiar with all these and he functions in a relaxed and, one might say, amicable way with all of them. He rides, hunts, and shoots, loves nature, and circulates freely, with rather obvious pleasure inside this world. His ignorance and incompletion begin at the borders of the more sophisticated social world. It is here that his labors and his tribulations will have to begin.

This labor is on the one hand the cognitive creation of the urban half of the universe, but it is also a process a self-creation. Let us not forget that "The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling" is to a good extent also a *Bildungsroman*, not without attention to virtue, piety, self-discipline and the normalities of socialization.

Instantly upon the "explosion" and his exile Tom Jones' world expands well beyond the rural environment in which he had grown up. The world now gradually constituted is by no means the Garden of Eden, but a complex, in many ways still imperfect cosmos, much as the Biblical (post-Edenic) one. Tom Jones is attracted by a sea-faring career, as he tries to reach Boston (Book VII), he discovers the Civil Wars and other political conflicts plaguing Britain, he is engaged in the military, becomes familiar with both officers and soldiers (Book VII). He encounters robbers, and gets acquainted with the life of roadside inns (Books VIII-X). Tom Jones makes the acquaintance of bands of Gypsies, as well as of beggars (Books XI-XII) but almost at the same time enters the

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world of high aristocracy: an Irish peer, Lady Bellaston (Book XIII and later), Lord Fellamar (Books XV-XVII) and others. We should remember that Allworthy and Western, important as they may have been in their own circles, are merely country squires. Tom Jones and a number of other characters discover and mentally reconstruct the metropolitan center of their country, London, with all its multiple facets and sections. Tom has also the experience of jail and lives briefly under the threat of even more serious legal punishments. This in turn is the consequence of a duel, again an activity of the upper layers of society. There can be no doubt that the universe now inhabited by Tom Jones is a complete, rounded, and complex one, full of contradictions that the young man had not even imagined.

An important dimension here is that this is not a static, fixed universe, but rather one based on unceasing dynamic movement and interaction. Not only Tom Jones, but also Sophia Western and her father had hardly ever crossed the borders of their native county, and this is true to some extent even about Allworthy. The "explosion" (as we called it before) leads to movement and action by practically all main (and a few secondary) characters present in the first five or six books of the novel. These characters now travel incessantly and their routes intersect time and again. We might say that we are now faced with an agitated and multicolored humanity trying to retrieve an original goodness; it will be recaptured at the end, though more by suggestion and hope, than in actuality.

Briefly and incompletely, Mrs Waters flies up and down the British Isles, sometimes known, sometimes incognito. Squire Western impulsively runs toward London, sometimes reaching it, sometimes not. Harriet Fitzpatrick (Sophia's cousin) is an escapee from an abusive marriage, pursued by her thuggish husband. Partridge (grade teacher, barber, servant, crafty adventurer) is on the run, attached to Tom Jones. Lawyer Dowling seems to be familiar everywhere, in expected and unexpected places. Good-natured Nightingale is not a stationary character either. Even Black George improbably reaches London. Blifil travels to London likewise. Venerable Allworthy comes twice to London. Such mobility is important, in my opinion, in as far as it contributes precisely to the construction of the improved and completed earthly cosmos that is the ultimate and all-encompassing purpose of Fielding's novel.

That this is so, is powerfully confirmed by the very organization of the novel: each of the eighteen books begins with an essay of the kind one would expect in Addison and Steele's "Spectator" or Dr. Johnson's "Rambler": the familiar, conversational essay, half-way between the philosophical and the literary. This is not the place to engage in a meticulous examination of these 18 (or nineteen, if the "Prologue" is included) essays. Suffice it to say that they deal with psychological, ethical, and theoretical issues. Together they might constitute a loose theory of literary writing. On the other hand these essays do have another importance. They indicate that world-construction needs inevitably

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an intellectual dimension that should help us understand nature and society. World-construction, we are thus told, is not a strictly physical or material activity with strictly physical or material outcomes. Interpretation is not just a game, but a useful, indispensable, contribution to human depiction and social healing.

Perhaps the most important in these successive layers of what we have called world-construction is the *pattern replacement and truth discovery* whether by Tom Jones himself, or by Allworthy, and certainly by the reader. A number of appearances are nullified and replaced by simpler and in a way more enlightening or explicative sets of facts. These contribute much to the erection of a world more closely analogous to Divine Creation.

To provide several examples, the adventurous Mrs. Waters turns out to be Jenny Jones, servant of Tom's servant and alleged illegitimate mother of the foundling; she ends up by eventually becoming the respectable wife of a parson. The spurious motive of Tom's imprisonment is dispelled entirely. Molly Seagrim is not the mother of Tom Jones's bastard child, the honor of paternity belongs to his ever-moralizing instructor, Square. Sophia Western is not Jenny Cameron. The repeated misrepresentations of Lady Bellaston regarding Tom Jones are ultimately all divulged. More generally Tom Jones gradually sheds his different masks: beggar, felon, erotic cavalier, society lion and is seen at the end settled in the role of sedate country squire. His erotic adventures are indeed numerous: Molly Seagrim, Mrs. Waters, Lady Bellaston, potentially Miss Honour as well as widow Arabella Hunt (who openly and unabashedly proposes marriage to him XV, 11) are all enthusiastic sex partners. However, in all these cases, Tom Jones is the passive and seduced partner, many of these female characters would be called nowadays "cougars" in search of a "boytoy". It might also be interesting to speculate whether the phonetic kinship between the names Don Juan and Tom Jones (the second a more vulgar or colloquial variant of the first) has any significance.

In fact Tom Jones is consistently loyal and faithful to Sophia Western, yet even in this case he is far from being enterprising or aggressive, rather he shows himself devoted and submissive. Their conjunction becomes definitive once the various patterns of reality are radically modified and purified. Of these patterns the most important by far is the one disclosing that Tom Jones is the senior brother, the more legitimate heir, virtuous in his stem and roots, his follies and errors being merely secondary or even misunderstandings of his generosity, kindness and willingness to sacrifice himself. The establishment of veracity is due, the author emphasizes, to Allworthy's willing repentance and admission of grievous fault.

We can conclude that the world-construction (an *"imitatio Dei"* in its way*)* in "Tom Jones" has four pillars. The ***first*** is spatial expansion and enrichment. The ***second*** is the modification and improvement of cognitive patterns, truth replacing mere initial impression. The ***third*** is the incessant

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mobility and dynamism of the characters. The ***fourth*** is the gentle and light-handed authorial pressure and philosophical explanation particularly in the introductory chapters, but not exclusively there. This is helpful in producing coherence and in vindicating the creative process. Throughout the novel transcendence is alluded to, or present by an ethical metonymy, rather than referred to directly and immediately.

Before finishing our all-too-brief exploration it is useful to point out that Fielding's novel can be placed inside a family of narratives, some of them approximately contemporary, others subsequent, in which we recognize a number of kinship features. Thus there are, as has often been observed by critics, elements of continuity with the picaresque tradition. We have to take into account however that picaresque novels are focused on just one character and that we have eliminated this kind of narration from the very beginning (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Peregrine Pickle* and dozens of others), prior to this chapter. At least two major works remain, too short to be taken into account. One of them is Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771), the other is Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* (1776), while *Tom Jones* was published, of course, in 1749.

The Vicar of Wakefield is a mere "novella" (long short story, short novel); the main analogy is the "divine-like" figure of Pastor Primrose who is submitted to the pattern happiness-fall-redemption. *Humphry Clinker* covers more geographical space in the service of reconstructive cosmic healing than *Tom Jones*, it also depicts a wandering society or group or tribe, with numerous types and dimensions, but it has less textual thickness than *Tom Jones*, also its cosmic construction is less articulate.

Surprisingly, better and deeper parallels can be found in Alessandro Manzoni's masterpiece *The Betrothed* (1827, 1842). There the action is more romantic, more dramatic, picturesque, and spectacular, after all it is embedded in the Romantic age. However, the skeleton of the *imitatio Dei* is much like the one of *Tom Jones*. We have a couple of enamored young people who are separated and who desperately try to be re-conjoined. They are engaged in compulsory wanderings, undergo adventures and cover large spaces, not only geographically, but also socially (in other words horizontally and vertically at the same time). The cosmic rebuilding ends in spectacular ways. Suspense and tragic options are encountered at every step, whereas in *Tom Jones* what prevails is comic misunderstanding, and a kind of general mildness, encouraged by the playful authorial voice.

Middlemarch, perhaps the greatest achievement of European *realistic* fiction (1871-1874), differs from the above-mentioned works in as far as its skeleton is not the "walk". This is not a cosmic construction by gradual, friendly and mild, dangerous or hectic, movement. It is much more constrained, most of the movements are observed inside a limited circle, inside confines and borders:

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a provincial town and its environs, with rare incursions outside. Nature and town-life are present, the society is broad, from country squires and wealthy businessman or commercial types to human beings close to debilitating penury. Thus the book's depth and thickness are astounding. *Middlemarch* might be described as a thick forest of Bildungsroman intersections: the reader is placed face to face with numerous cases of growth and decay, of psychological and social and vital change that influence each other. The links and the dialectic between the ethical and the psychological are superbly executed. The atheist author allows most characters to build their own version of the universe, and only the analogies and contradictions of these worlds approximate a universal totality.

To summarize and conclude, the branch of the "very long novel" here examined illustrates an authorial awareness of limited possibilities: human creativity as a smaller satellite of Divine Creation. George Eliot touches upon sly, self-interested malice, but not upon full-fledged villainy and crime. *Middlemarch* is a step down from the lofty aspirations of religion to the categories of ethics. So is *Tom Jones*. Fielding's novel, as well as Manzoni's are characterized by incessant mobility: building through walk and discovery. Society will function through completeness, from cardinals, saints, and quasi-royal figures to beggars, mobs, and modest peasant figures. Humans imitate the Divine, not primarily through deification, but rather through social creativity, these novels tell the reader.

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