

Modern Critical Interpretations

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INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Fanny Burney's Evelina



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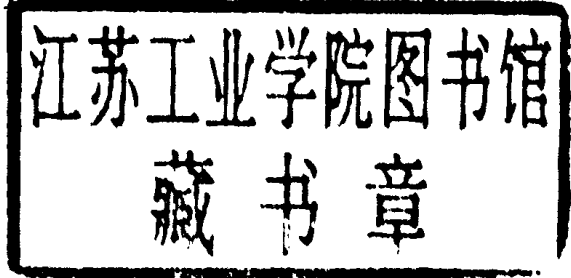
Fanny Burney's
Evelina

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Evelina

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of Fanny Burney's novel, *Evelina*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Jennifer Wagner for her erudition and judgment in helping me to edit this volume.

My introductory remarks take some exception to the feminist readings that are strongly represented in this book. Ronald Paulson begins the chronological sequence of criticism by comparing *Evelina* to Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*.

In Susan Staves's discussion, we are reminded of the difficulties of being a female as *Evelina* confronts them. Variations upon this argument are eloquently manifested by Patricia Meyer Spacks's analysis of the "dynamics of fear" in the novel, and by Judith Lowder Newton's view of *Evelina* as a "chronicle of assault."

Mary Poovey's feminist emphasis is upon the novel's reflection of Fanny Burney's "trauma" at growing up the daughter, rather than the son, of the celebrated Charles Burney, friend of Johnson, Edmund Burke, and Sir Joshua Reynolds.

This book concludes with two previously unpublished essays that provide refinements upon earlier feminist criticism. In a brief exegesis, Jennifer Wagner considers "privacy and anonymity" in *Evelina* as figurations for achieving "a name of one's own," while Julia Epstein charts the "sophisticated and knowing rebellion" of *Evelina* against the violence offered her in and by her society.

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Introduction

Evelina or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World (1778) earned the approbation of Dr. Samuel Johnson, who remains in my judgment, as in that of many others, the best critic in Western literary history. These days *Evelina* seems to attract mostly feminist critics, though it is hardly a precursor of their ideologies and sensibilities. A reader who knows the novels of Samuel Richardson will recognize immediately how indebted Fanny Burney was to him, and any reader of Jane Austen will be interested in *Evelina* in order to contrast the very different ways in which Richardson influenced the two women novelists. In itself, *Evelina* provides a rather mixed aesthetic experience upon rereading, at least to me. Its largest strength is in its humor and in Fanny Burney's quite extraordinary ear for modes of speech. What is rather disappointing is *Evelina* herself, who records the wit and spirits of others, while herself manifesting a steady goodness that is not ideally suited for fictional representation.

Entrance is indeed the novel's central metaphor, and *Evelina* enters the social world as a kind of lesser Sir Charles Grandison, rather than as a lesser *Clarissa*. This is not to say that *Evelina*'s advent in the book does not please us. Fanny Burney shrewdly delays, and we do not have direct acquaintance with *Evelina* until the lively start of Letter 8:

This house seems to be the house of joy; every face wears a smile, and a laugh is at every body's service. It is quite amusing to walk about and see the general confusion; a room leading to the garden is fitting up for Captain Mirvan's study. Lady Howard does not sit a moment in a place; Miss Mirvan is making caps; every body so busy!—such flying from room to room!—so many orders given, and retracted, and given again! nothing but hurry and perturbation.

Ronald Paulson praises *Evelina* as a careful balance of the old and the new, of Smollettian satire and a pre-Austenian ironic sensibility. I am surprised always when Smollett's effect upon Fanny Burney is judiciously demonstrated, as it certainly is by Paulson, precisely because *Evelina* cannot be visualized as journeying in the superbly irascible company of Matthew Bramble, whereas one can imagine her in dignified converse with Sir Charles Grandison. That seems another indication of a trouble in *Evelina* as a novel, the trouble alas being *Evelina* herself. In a world of roughness and wit, she remains the perpetual anomaly, too good for her context and too undivided to fascinate her reader. One implicit defense of *Evelina* is the polemic of Susan Staves, who views the heroine's dominant affect as being one of acute anxiety, since she is frequently in danger of sexual (or quasi-sexual) assault. Staves has a telling and lovely sentence: "*Evelina's* progress through the public places of London is about as tranquil as the progress of a fair-haired girl through modern Naples." Surrounded by Smollettian characters, the non-Smollettian *Evelina* must struggle incessantly to maintain her delicacy. That is clearly the case, and yet again, this creates a problem for the reader. Delicacy under assault is very difficult to represent except in a comic mode, since more of our imaginative sympathy is given to rambunctiousness than to virtue.

This makes it highly problematic, at least for me, to read *Evelina* either as a study in the dynamics of fear or as a chronicle of assault. If I find *Evelina* herself a touch too bland in her benignity, nevertheless she seems to me commendably tough, and rather less traumatized than some feminist critics take her to be. Historical changes in psychology are very real, and eighteenth-century men and women (of the same social class) have more in common with one another than say eighteenth-century women intellectuals have in common with our contemporary feminist critics. *Evelina* (and Fanny Burney) are less obsessed by Electra complexes, and less dismayed by female difficulties, than many among us, and a curious kind of anachronism is too frequently indulged these days.

Like her creator, Fanny Burney, who knew so well how to live in the forceful literary world of her father's companions, *Evelina* is ultimately stronger and shrewder than any of the men, and nearly all of the women, in her own universe. They may assault her delicacy, but she outwits them, and subtly triumphs over them. Her goodness does not exclude the skills of a grand manip-

ulator. She is an anomaly in her sensibility, but not in her admirably poised social sense, and her manifold virtues coexist with an enigmatic cunning, suitable to the social psychology of her era.

Evelina: Cinderella and Society

Ronald Paulson

Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778), [one] critic [Montague and Martz] has observed, uses "*Humphry Clinker* as a base for operations in the direction of Jane Austen." Austen was a careful reader of Burney, and Burney owes an obvious debt to Smollett. Although the plot of *Evelina* receives a great deal more emphasis than that of *Humphry Clinker*, both novels are structurally a series of letters describing a series of places visited, an itinerary held together by a conventional sentimental plot. Unacknowledged fathers, the lowly who turn out to be highborn, and brothers who find their lost sisters are all ingredients of the sentimental plot in both novels. The themes in both—though different—are conveyed by the cities and country houses visited. *Evelina* goes from the country to London with the acceptable Mirvan family; then back to the country and again to London, this time in the company of the impossible, vulgar Branghtons and Mme. Duval; then back to the country and to Bristol Hot Well with people of quality, the Beaumonts; and finally to Bath with Lord Orville. The effect here is not too different from that of a scene in London or Bath seen through the eyes of Bramble, then Jerry, and then Winifred Jenkins and Tabitha. In a more formalized, static way, these letters serve the function of *Evelina*'s different guides, revealing and opposing "different points of view and incompatible ways of meeting the same experience" (Baker). In this sense *Humphry*

From *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*. © 1967 by Yale University. Yale University Press, 1967.

Clinker points away from the true-false world of formal verse satire toward the infinitely qualified world of the novel of manners.

The central unit of both novels is the test scene in which the attitudes of various types are brought together and analyzed. *Evelina* is a series of these big scenes—Evelina's first assembly, her first opera, the drawing room of the Beaumonts, and so on. In *Humphry Clinker* the moral discourse in which one satirist attacks an evil is the simplest scene of this sort: Bramble attacks the affectation that makes people desire the fashionable waters of Bath, however disgusting and unhealthy. There are also scenes in which more than one satirist appears, and the object of attack is not so clearly defined. As we move north, away from the blatant folly of London, these scenes increase in number and the distinctions between right and wrong become less clear-cut. The practical jokes and counter practical jokes of the Bulford house party, with their repercussions of hurt pride and endangered health, raise the question of who in a given circumstance is right and who is wrong. And what of Micklewhimmen, the sophisticate who pretends to be an invalid in order to excite compassion from the ladies? The alarm of fire being sounded, he proves himself both wholly sound and a coward, knocking down old ladies in his hurry to save himself; but his good-humored acceptance of the unmasking, ending in his dancing a jig, leaves one wondering whether he is admirable or not; whether he or Bramble or a clergyman who enters into the argument or Tabby, who refuses to forgive him under any circumstances, is really right. There are also the scenes in which Bramble, Lismahago, Tabby, and others argue, social types mix, manners are tested, and the norm of behavior becomes, almost inevitably, a compromise between two or more partially correct attitudes.

These scenes place the satirist in a larger context. Like Harriet Byron and Charlotte Grandison, Bramble is finally just one more point of view, one more example, in the larger picture of the novel. In *Evelina* Burney presents the characteristic satiric figures common in Smollett's novels—the sharp-tongued Mrs. Selwyn, the practical-satirist Captain Mirvan, and in his way even the fop Lovel. But in every case they are regarded coldly, the moral or public content has gone out of their observations, and they are merely private characters, their particular satiric approach a pattern of manners. Mirvan is a case in point; he is the Smollettian sea dog, as well as the prankster and the Juvenalian whose indignation bubbles over into violent action when confronted with such outrages to his native John Bullishness as the preposterous

Mme. Duval. He can be found in any of Smollett's novels, but he has undergone the same metamorphosis as Holder and Bulford in *Humphry Clinker*; he has become a prankster and a boor. The difference appears in the one scene in which Mirvan most resembles the early Smollettian satirists, Random, Pickle, and Cadwallader Crabtree—the incident in which he dresses up a monkey to look like the fop Lovel. The monkey is a commentary on Lovel just as the Pygmalion girl Peregrine creates is a commentary on high society, but the monkey proceeds to emphasize the cruelty beyond satire by biting Lovel's ear. The scene arouses only pity for Lovel, who for a moment becomes a human being as well as a fop. By contrast, the moral function is completely absent in all Mirvan's other pranks, and in the pranks he plays on Mme. Duval he appears simply as a coarse lout, like his counterparts in *Humphry Clinker*.

The chief difference between the two novels, however, lies in the fact that in *Evelina* the places and scenes not only are part of a satiric survey of society, but also are stages in the social climb of a young girl. One difficulty in Smollett's novels up to *Humphry Clinker* was his inability to merge his sentimental plot conventions and his real center of interest (the satiric scene); *Evelina* carries Smollett's work a step further, fitting his psychological form to the logical form of the courtship. For this aspect of her novel, Burney drew upon *Sir Charles Grandison*, omitting the melodramatic end of the spectrum. But the plot Burney follows in *Evelina* is not solely made up of the stages of a courtship; it simultaneously consists of the stages in the social ascent of a young girl. Evelina, the chief letter writer of the novel, has much in common with Harriet Byron, but she has more with Sir Charles Grandison's young ward, Emily Jervois, a naive observer without Harriet's certainty in her own judgment; Emily's horrible mother becomes Evelina's Mme. Duval, with the implications more fully developed.

Evelina is sharp and critical, and her standards are high; but as Bramble is isolated by his illness, she (like Humphry Clinker) is isolated by her birth. She is outside society, of obscure parentage, and comes from a sheltered life in the country which sets off the vice of London in vivid relief. However, the function of her equivocal position is no longer simply to make her a touchstone or a satirist (though she is a little of both) but to put her outside society—a "nobody" as Lovel calls her—so that she literally does not know who she is; her progression then is not, like Harriet's, toward fulfillment, but toward self-definition and identity.

The same progression is evident in both Bramble and that other "nobody" Humphry. Bramble is shown as a man in search of health, which is finally a knowledge of his own past, achieved by going back over the country of his youth and making an important discovery about himself. But in *Humphry Clinker* searches for self-definition are tangential and subordinate and thus are only other aspects of a larger theme dealing with attitudes toward experience in general. In *Evelina* the satiric aspects, the attitudes toward the world, are subordinated to the protagonist's personal search, which is thus the theme of the novel.

Although Evelina has the satirist's inclination, she is closer to the character of Lydia Melford. What Smollett did not see was the possibility of making the young girl with a finer sensibility than his masculine characters a satirist, perhaps because he knew she lacked the freedom of choice of a man and so could not finally maintain the satirist's standards. Lydia, the naive, impressionable, sensitive young girl, comes to each new place with wide eyes and (like her uncle and brother) is appalled at what she discovers; pretty soon, however, she recognizes the fashionableness of it and tries to adjust. Lydia is a rough sketch for the figure of a young girl like Evelina, who is an outsider, is sensitive enough to see the wrongness of the society she enters, but still knows she must make common cause with it; she must come to terms with a society she has first seen through.

The obvious source for this aspect of *Evelina*, however, is the French novelist Marivaux's *Vie de Marianne* (1731; Eng. trans., 1736). Burney takes not only the names Duval and Mirvan from Mme. Dutour and Mme. de Miran, and Orville from M. de Valville, but also the situation of the girl in the anomalous position of not knowing her parents but suspecting that they were noble and rich: "If my only Fault," she says, "had been not to be born of rich Parents; had I but a noble extraction without a Fortune; all still would have been safe." But she believes herself to be of a rich, noble family, while her actual status is not above a linen draper's. Her actions soon convince the reader of her quality, but society is not so ready to grant her the place she deserves. She has to bear the middle-class abuse of her linen-draper landlady, an attempted seduction by her "benefactor" M. de Climal, threatened poverty, the jealousy and interference of her potential husband's family, her lover's unfaithfulness, and finally, just when she is on the verge of success, the greedy clutches of the Church which would cheat her out of her recently acquired inheritance.

A brief contrast with *Joseph Andrews* is in order. Fielding may

have looked to *Marianne* as a useful example of how Richardson *should* have written; here he found a similar plot (again perhaps one of Richardson's sources) but also detachment, analysis, and criticism of the protagonist as well as a broader and less intense view of experience. The single action of the attempted seduction, which takes up a large part of *Pamela*, is dispatched quickly in *Marianne*. When M. de Climal attempts to seduce Marianne he is scorned and dismissed; though she is left temporarily destitute, there is no danger that she will lose her honor. Instead of experiencing one, long, intense trial, Marianne is confronted by a variety of obstacles which bring her into contact with a cross section of French society, from country clerics to tradespeople, from convent nuns to vain young women and gossips. Fielding has Joseph suffer the same persecution and end a scion of a good family. His gentility also shows through as a natural virtue, evident to the perceptive.

The difference between Joseph and Marianne (or Evelina) is notable, however: he is given no awareness of his true status and so never aspires. There is no conflict within him, and his relationship with society is the simple satiric one of virtue persecuted. Fielding merely substitutes charity for chastity as Joseph's main motive force. On the other hand, Marianne (and much more, Jacob in Marivaux's *Paysan parvenu*) acts with a consummate sense of the realities that Joseph blithely ignores. Her virtues are social rather than personal, and her delicate sensibility expresses a happy blending of the ability to respond emotionally and an acuteness in judging the results of a generous and timely action.

In a sense Marivaux has in a single try hit upon the novel of manners that the English slowly evolved over another half-century through the gradual refining of satiric forms and intentions. The two basic situations of the novel of manners illustrate the point. The first is the situation that developed in England as the satirist-satirized was refined into a Dr. Primrose and an Evelina. At the beginning of part 2 of Marivaux's novel, Marianne goes to church and observes (as the first-person narrator) all the fashionable folk posing and posturing in their pews. She is a country girl in the great city, and she describes these manners with a fresh style, meditates a bit on them, and then tells how her own simplicity and beauty drew all eyes away from the affected coquettes. For just an instant she sets off the artificial beauty of the others by her own natural beauty, smiling at the psychology of the men (her hand, she says, is what captures them). But almost at once

the reader's interest shifts from the coquettes and the beaux looking at Marianne to her own psychology: she is not merely a device for showing up the artifice of the coquettes; she is a character who is becoming vain talking about their vanity.

Her flaw has hardly been fastened upon when the situation is completely overturned by her seeing a handsome young man (Valville) and becoming herself enamored. This leads into the second situation, which could not have taken place with the innocence of Joseph Andrews—the scene of snobbery leading to embarrassment. Marianne has been so smitten by Valville that she walks in front of a horse on her way home and is saved by him. With her apparent gentility she soon has Valville's heart at least partly in her grasp. But only with much difficulty does she keep from him the nature of her lodgings with a linen draper. When the coach takes her from Valville's house to her lodgings, her landlady characteristically attacks the coachman as a highway robber who should be beaten rather than paid. Marianne is horrified to see her lover's footman across the street, taking in the whole, sordid, middle-class scene, which she has tried so hard to keep from Valville. (Significantly, the embarrassment is at the hands of Mme. Dutour, as Evelina's is at the hands of Mme. Duval.)

The scene of embarrassment is more particularly a testing. Embarrassment, for example, is only one of Marianne's reactions. Mme. Dutour exhibits behavior that can be painful only to refined sentiments. The crucial test of this sort comes with M. de Climal's proposition. Assuming that Marianne's virtue corresponds to her social position, he offers her a guaranteed yearly stipend for her consent. Her scornful refusal is a rejection of the moral position of an entire class and demonstrates convincingly her true affiliation with a higher class. Mme. Dutour's middle-class reaction (similar to the one Fielding attributed to Pamela) is to advise Marianne to play Climal for all he is worth—to accept his presents and then let him discover that his money will not buy her virtue. The two elements are constantly in tension—the girl's lack of social status and her actual possession of it. Thus Marianne and Evelina can be shown in scenes in which snobbery leads to embarrassment, in scenes in which embarrassment or indignation is justified (a revelation of their true affiliation with the upper classes), and often in scenes in which both appear simultaneously.

Evelina's struggles to keep the unpleasant Sir Clement Willoughby from seeing her with the Branghtons are very reminiscent of Marianne's efforts to keep Valville from learning where she lives. The