

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



MASTER NARRATIVES

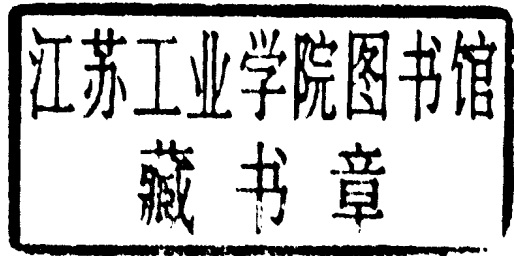
TELLERS AND
TELLING IN THE
ENGLISH NOVEL

EDITED BY
RICHARD GRAVIL

Master Narratives

Tellers and telling in the English novel

Edited by
Richard Gravil



Ashgate

Aldershot • Burlington USA • Singapore • Sydney

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Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hants GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
131 Main Street
Burlington, VT 05401-5600 USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com
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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Master Narratives: tellers and telling in the English novel. – (The nineteenth century series)

1. English fiction – 19th century – History and criticism
2. Reality in literature

I.Gravil, Richard
823.8'09

Library of Congress Control Number: 200187432

Printed on acid-free paper

Typeset in Times New Roman by the editor

ISBN 0 7546 0128 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

The Nineteenth Century

General Editors' Preface

The aim of this series is to reflect, develop and extend the great burgeoning of interest in the nineteenth century that has been an inevitable feature of recent decades, as that former epoch has come more sharply into focus as a locus for our understanding not only of the past but of the contours of our modernity. Though it is dedicated principally to the publication of original monographs and symposia in literature, history, cultural analysis, and associated fields, there will be a salient role for reprints of significant text from, or about, the period. Our overarching policy is to address the spectrum of nineteenth-century studies without exception, achieving the widest scope in chronology, approach and range of concern. This, we believe, distinguishes our project from comparable ones, and means, for example, that in the relevant areas of scholarship we both recognize and cut innovatively across such parameters as those suggested by the designations 'Romantic' and 'Victorian'. We welcome new ideas, while valuing tradition. It is hoped that the world which predates yet so forcibly predicts and engages our own will emerge in parts, as a whole, and in the lively currents of debate and change that are so manifest an aspect of its intellectual, artistic and social landscape.

Vincent Newey
Joanne Shattock

University of Leicester

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Introduction

Richard Gravil

The essays in this volume have been composed in memory of the late Bill Ruddick, a notable scholar and teacher, an inveterate reader and reviewer of nineteenth-century fiction, and, for most of the contributors, a close and beloved friend. The authors engage with a selection of literal 'master narratives', texts which in one way or another represent growth points in the development of the novel. All of the essays explore what Fredric Jameson called the 'objective' structures of particular texts: 'the historicity of its forms and of its content, the historical moment of emergence of its linguistic possibilities, the situation-specific function of its aesthetic'. Most of them reflect, also, on the function of such texts as what Jameson called 'symbolic move[s] in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation' with one or other of society's 'master narratives'.¹

What makes some novels more indispensable than others, and what mysterious process determines their inclusion in a teaching canon? According to Terry Eagleton, 'Literature is a vital instrument for the insertion of individuals into the perceptual and symbolic forms of the dominant ideological formation'. In this somewhat monolithic view, 'Ideology adapts individuals to their social function by providing them with an imaginary model of the whole, suitably schematized and fictionalized for their purposes'.² This loosely Althusserian notion became so commonplace in the late 1970s and 1980s as to constitute a virtual critical hegemony today. Macdonald Daly, for example, tells readers of *Mary Barton* that the novel is canonized because it is crucial to 'the self-renewing programme of the bourgeois intelligentsia'.³ Students are often taught, and may believe, that novels, especially canonical novels, simply reflect whatever cultural historians take to be the dominant cultural formations of the writer's epoch. Dickens wrote in an era of patriarchy: his novels, therefore, are interesting primarily as evidence of the pervasiveness of 'domestic ideology'; the use of his fiction, if any, is to provide examples of the pastness of the past. Yet, as Raymond Williams insisted, the making of art is 'always a formative process', involving a tension between what is thought and what is being lived: what is 'perceived' and 'dominant' is already past (to Blake and Nietzsche one's thoughts are already merely the bones of thought) but the novel belongs to the present. The novel exhibits tensions between what is felt and what is merely thought, between the objective and the personal, between what is 'believed' and what is 'experienced'; its proper realm, then, is the 'emergent'.⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin's most characteristic proposition, the basis of his (debatable) claim for the primacy of the novel over other genres, is that the form includes dissenting voices and dramatizes fissures in what may appear a monolithic ideological formation: 'The novel comes into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present The Novelist is drawn towards everything that is not yet completed'.⁵

So the premises, even of what might be considered an ideologically cohesive body of criticism, can generate fundamentally opposed views of what makes novels, and what drives canon-formation. A conservative model of canon-formation suspects the novel, especially the realist novel, of serving the dominant structures of value in the bourgeois state; a radical model might see the canon as constituted by those novels which have most successfully, if not always coherently, expressed an emergent consciousness, challenged most effectively the received social codes, created space for new structures of feeling. In the essays that follow, each writer has kept one eye, implicitly or explicitly, on this question, while focusing on the claims of the particular novel to have contributed something unique to our sense of what fiction can do; to have brought some new fictional element into being, mastered some facet of the art of telling.

Bill Hutchings, in 'How pleasant to meet Mr Fielding', takes up the vexatious business of the novel as history and the novelist as historian, a self-conscious model of writing that was playfully taken up by Sterne, Scott and George Eliot. For a Modernist such as Ford Madox Ford, as Hutchings points out, what is aesthetically desirable is to convey as immediately as possible (that is, without consciousness of any medium) the actuality of a scene or a character. 'All authorial intrusion should ideally be avoided, the scene being directly presented to readers as if they were themselves witnessing it'. Precisely this business of 'witnessing', however, is what Fielding as a professional lawyer is concerned with, and the illusions of realism, much contested in postmodern writing and by such a realist as George Eliot, are already suspect to Fielding. His narrator must, therefore, be overtly present and available for inspection. Fielding's age was occupied with the concept of objectivity. 'Objectivity is the result of a communal act of observation, a pooling of our perceptions towards a series of general truths.' Thus, *Tom Jones* foregrounds the inevitable subjectivity of any particular narrator, the problematics of objectivity. Fielding uses the judicial system 'as a running metaphor for how we judge human actions and motivation'.

Jayne Lewis's essay on 'The (Ante)Postmodernity of *Tristram Shandy*' explores what might be termed the wormhole theory of fiction, exemplified by *Tristram Shandy* even more than by *Roderick Random* or *Tom Jones*, whereby it and a work like Barth's *The Sotweed Factor* might appear to be contemporaries. Certainly, his novel seems to have much more in common with Proust, Woolf and Joyce than with Fielding, Richardson or Smollett. Its narrative technique, 'spun of interruption, digression, and all species of textual chasm', can make one feel that 'the English novel was postmodern even before it was modern'. Lewis's chapter acknowledges that *Tristram Shandy* gestures 'toward an atemporal dimension in the history of narrative', but its searching analysis of several aspects of Sterne's narrative technique shows that whatever *Tristram Shandy*'s lack of *intrinsic* difference from certain modern and postmodern novels, it exhibits profound *situational* differences from them. Ironically, Professor Lewis argues, some of the qualities that seem to make it timeless stem, when historically considered, from certain very eighteenth-century dispositions, for instance the period's neo-epicureanism and its 'sensibility'.

Historical fiction may have become academically marginalized, but the form Scott perfected has been the staple genre for a long tradition of cultural analysts, from James Fenimore Cooper to J. G. Farrell, concerned with the conflict of cultures and the birth of nations. The particular instance that Mary Wedd examines carries much scholarly baggage, of a kind that may at first appear remote from the matter at hand. Yet her '*Old Mortality*: editor and narrator' shows how Scott's editorial apparatus, with its presumption of scholarly and historical documentation, and antiquarian addenda, ironically undercuts the 'authority' of the narrative itself. Jedediah Cleishbotham, who introduces himself as editor of the 'tales of my Landlord' insists that he is 'not the writer, redacter or compiler', nor in any way 'answerable for the contents'. Peter Pattieson, the school teacher who has collected the accounts of '*Old Mortality*', died before he could assemble them in publishable form. Not the landlord, nor the schoolteacher, nor Cleishbotham (whose initials mark many of the footnotes) is responsible for the narrative. Scott may not be much reputed as an ironist, but Mary Wedd's essay shows how this plurality of 'authorities' relates intimately to the ubiquitous ironies of *Old Mortality*. At the heart of the novel is a problem that has not become any less relevant in our times: that of the barbarous pursuit of rival 'goods', or as Mary Wedd puts it, 'idealism yoked to atrocity'.

As narrative device, Mary Shelley typically gives her central character an opportunity to study the literary tradition in which she has placed him or her. The creature in *Frankenstein* acquires an education in reading *Paradise Lost* and *Werther*. The action of *The Last Man* is suspended so that attention can be given to Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*. Frederick Burwick's first essay in this collection, on '*Mathilda* – Who Knew Too Much', shows how Mathilda, in telling the story of her relationship with her father, reveals expert knowledge of the literature of father-daughter incest, quoting from Alfieri's *Myrrha*, Boccaccio's tale of Tancred and Ghismunda, Fletcher's *The Captain*. Written in 1819, but unpublished until 1959, the novel was sent to William Godwin, who blocked its publication 'by declining to return it to her'. Without imputing father-daughter incest to Mary Shelley's experience, Professor Burwick's essay recognizes (as Godwin presumably did) how the novel reflects the strained relationship between the author and her father, and makes use of a theme already prominent in the Byron-Shelley circle. As Nicola Trott has also suggested in a recent study of *Frankenstein*,⁶ 'Mary', in Frederick Burwick's words, 'had good reason to reflect on a father's trespassing the boundaries of love'.

'Persuasion' is not only the title of Jane Austen's most engaged novel, but a key term in Blake's thought, and in Wordsworth's. The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, for instance speaks of the dangers of one kind of persuasion: a writer's 'own feelings are his own stay and support, and if he sets them aside in one instance, he may be induced to repeat this act till his mind loses all confidence in itself and becomes utterly debilitated'. Blake's 'firm persuasion' provides a subtler bridge to connect *Persuasion* with fundamental Romantic postulates than the oft-noticed democratic spirit manifested in the novel (for instance, the simple fact that all the decent characters work for a living and all the

landed ones are in moral decay). Jane Stabler's "'Perswasion'" in *Persuasion* begins with Blake's encounter with Isaiah in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to alert us to one of the many meanings of the word 'persuasion' in the Romantic period, that of firm inner conviction or religious belief. Jane Austen uses the verb 'to persuade' and its cognate forms throughout her fictional writing and this chapter examines the way in which the novel tests the different meanings of its title, alternating between the social arena of verbal appeals and entreaties to the private world of personal conviction: above all, the essay shows how *Persuasion* presents the act of perception as one conditioned by persuasion, and explores how this theme is experienced in the relationship between narrator and readers.

Recent readings of *Wuthering Heights* tend to fall into two categories; Marxist readings, centred on Heathcliff, and feminist ones centred on Catherine. Frederick Burwick's '*Wuthering Heights* as bifurcated novel' belongs to a third kind, more responsive to the various doublings in the novel's narrative structure. Its two narrators juxtapose two culturally divergent discourses. Its narrative time, 1801–2, overlaps only with the close of its three-generation story, but in a way that allows the events of the last three decades to have more immediacy at times than those of the early nineteenth century. Moreover, a novel in two volumes, with two heroines, mother and daughter, must in some sense be centrally preoccupied with matters of continuity and change, which might take the form of rebellion and accommodation, or might, with very different vibrations, explore the evolution from failed prototype to viable human being. One volume, as it were, ironizes the other; but which ironies are the author's? After all, its first volume ends with a startling bibliographical metaphor, asking what predicament the narrator would be in if he fell for the younger Catherine's witcheries, and the daughter turned out 'a second edition of the Mother'. Professor Burwick's essay explores the dimensions of irony created through the echoes across the generational gap of the first and second parts of the novel.

In some ways a realist rewrite of *Wuthering Heights* (at least, as that novel is read by Terry Eagleton in his own masterpiece, *Myths of Power*) *Mary Barton* suffers from a narrative voice that seems as uncertain in its sympathies as Catherine Earnshaw is in hers – passionately involved with Heathcliff, yet unable to relinquish the attachments of class. The editor's '*Negotiating Mary Barton*' addresses this ambivalence. Too many readings of the novel address what Gaskell is expected to say, rather than what the text does say: its instabilities, though not always under control, may reflect a conscious strategy of engagement with a divided public and mask a considerable degree of communicative irony. Certainly, the novel is more historically aware than are some of the condescending constructions that have been placed upon it. What John Barton knows, the author knows; what he says, she amply corroborates; what he does, as a crime of commission, she equates – in deliberate symbolism – to the employers' murder by neglect. Where her narrator stands is quite another matter.

Modern readers have to make do with single-volume unillustrated editions of what were once lavishly illustrated three-deckers. Yet the quality of nineteenth-century

illustrations, usually placed with considerable care, enriched the reader's experience. Alan Shelston's 'Three Sisters amid the Grotesque', exploring a topic that greatly fascinated the dedicatee of this book, examines the narrative function of grotesque illustration, including feminine icons and grotesque surroundings, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Alice* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Henry James once complained: 'Anything that relieves responsible prose of the duty of being ... good enough, interesting enough and, if the question be of picture, pictorial enough, does it the worst of services'. A twenty-first-century reader, with the 'aesthetic' advantages of twentieth-century horrors to fall back on, who reads Dickens's account of Krook's shop and then glances at the illustrator's attempt to render the full horror of this human processing plant, may well find the illustration redundant, and its clutter too clean. Dickens's prose seems more 'pictorial'. Alan Shelston's essay invites one to ask whether we owe such a style to the coincidence of Dickens's career with the golden age of book illustration. Dickens wrote when the multi-media novel spurred authors to 'picture' their places and people. How much does this coincidence account for the disturbing pictorial dynamics that we know as Dickens's inimitable style?

The editor's second essay, 'The Androgyny of *Bleak House*' addresses what Ellen Moers has called 'the single "woman question" novel in the Dickens canon'. This work purports to be co-authored by a transcendent male observer and a domestic but illegitimate female agent, whose perspectives, it can be argued, are polarized at the outset of the novel, yet gradually merge into a speculatively desirable androgyny. Using a variety of voices from mid-century discussions of the nature of men and women, and the proper separation of their spheres, the essay suggests that the form of *Bleak House* emerges to deal with structures of feeling that may have been far from Dickens's own. Ostensibly, Dickens in *Bleak House* and Mill in *The Subjection of Women* are poles apart. Yet the two belonged to much the same networks, and Dickens is an almost unique instance of a writer who kept one foot in radical dissenting circles, while commanding a mass, middle-class audience. It has been argued elsewhere that Dora in *David Copperfield* designedly illustrates Unitarian critiques of 'toy' women, and that *Dombey and Son* covertly deploys the trope of marriage as prostitution, a trope passed down from Wollstonecraft and Godwin, through the Chartists and Unitarians.⁷ His novels, that is, may be seen, as can *Household Words*, as constituting a bridge between the radical fringe to which in some respects he belonged, and the middle-class audience he could command. Certainly, the experimental structure of *Bleak House* suggests a major imaginative response to a question he could not fully resolve, yet which he anatomizes and articulates more successfully in this novel than in any other.

Nicola Trott, similarly, finds a challenge to 'separate spheres' ideology written into George Eliot's oxymoronic 'home epic', perhaps an even stronger candidate for the title of greatest English novel of the century. *Middlemarch*, once described as the novel all novels want to be when they grow up, enacts some of the displacements required of the novel when it came of age. It displaces the epic, while, at a deeper level, displacing the social and metaphysical assumptions of those who, at this date, felt nost-

algia for epic grandeur and epic values. Moreover, it displaces that simple sense of reality that critics persist in seeing as characteristic of pre-Moderns. *Middlemarch* does not, of course, exemplify an age of innocence before our sense of reality became problematic: its major characters, Lydgate, Dorothea and Harriet Bulstrode, all have to learn that their 'worlds' are contingent upon other 'worlds' which cut across theirs. Their simple ideals are thwarted by an environment in which the codes of epic and religious fulfilment are supplanted by those of domestic and moral accommodation. Nicola Trott's essay is expertly cognizant of the novel's problematizing intellectual contexts, particularly the impact of the higher criticism, and of the researches of Eliot and her scientific consort, G. H. Lewes. Their interests combined the contemporaneous erosion of concepts of heroic authorship ('Homer' and the Bible become re-read in this period as deposits of collective experience) with the promotion of a social and ecological concept of human being. The novel's texture, as well as its moral probing, announces the death of the individual as an abstraction. In *Middlemarch* the pressures of such emergent structures result in a genre metamorphosis impelled by Eliot's astonishing intellectual reach.

In such a novel, capable of its own Romantic agonies, romance values simply dissolve in the crucible of fictional scepticism, as indeed they do in Conrad. As Cedric Watts put it, in introducing the 1985 Penguin edition of *Lord Jim*, Conrad's scepticism 'was an acid that burnt deeply into the ideological alloys of his age'. Classic readings of this novel attend to its narrative structure as the formal manifestation of that scepticism: the series of tragic, anguished or comic readings of Jim offered by the multiple narrative thwart the reader's attempt to arrive at any simple computation of moral defectiveness. Marlow undermines the supremely self-confident Captain Brierly – 'I had a glimpse of the real Brierly a few days before he committed his reality and sham together to the keeping of the sea'. The French Lieutenant's hollowness exposes itself in farce: 'But the honour – the honour, monsieur! ... The honour ... that is real!'. Chester's fatuous 'You must see things exactly as they are' epitomizes the problem. Gerard Barrett's essay on *Lord Jim* locates a more fundamental scepticism in the novel's medium, found both in its 'generic heterogeneity' – as at once 'an adventure story, a love story, a courtroom drama' – and, more fundamentally still, in its figurative language, which leads into 'a separate order of knowledge from that of the literal'. One could see Dickens, from whom Conrad learned the trick of instant characterization, stumbling into the same technique in *Bleak House*: those 'attendant wigs' all 'stuck in a fog bank' (chapter 1) are merely metonymies stuck in a metaphor. But Conrad's 'ineluctable' ambiguities are more radical and even more systemic. The business cards which Jim forces on visiting captains, are, Barrett suggests, 'micro-texts' which by being 'concise, clear, confident, commercial, one-dimensional and referential' epitomize the antithetical realm of Conrad's macro-text, a text in which 'ordered and predictable standards of moral and social conduct' (clearly 'there' in Dickens) are at issue.

Virginia Woolf's peculiar gift is to problematize consciousness, rendering, in Lily Briscoe's case, as Michael O'Neill puts it, not simply 'the meaning of her "impressions",

but ‘of the whole business of having “impressions” at all’. Lawrence’s peculiar gift – very peculiar in a prophet – is to allow the consciousness of his characters access to his narrative voice, so much so that they take possession of it, to the confusion of critics seeking to impose a reading of Lawrence onto Lawrence’s texts. In ‘The Fox’, for example, crude readings tend to extrapolate all too easily from ‘hero’ to author. In *Sons and Lovers* it is hard to see quite how it happens, but Mr Morel becomes a centre of sympathy despite all efforts of Mrs Morel and Paul Morel and the ‘point of view’ to marginalize him. In ‘Liking or Disliking: Conrad, Woolf, Lawrence’, O’Neill takes three such modernist texts, *To the Lighthouse*, *Women in Love* and *Heart of Darkness*, which tend to be read more reductively and flatly than they deserve. The essay considers the kind of sympathy elicited in *To the Lighthouse* and *Women in Love* for characters whom critics of particular ideological bearings, and arguably, the authors themselves, insofar as we still believe in authors, see as ‘bad’. All three texts ‘dramatize the treacherous quicksands that beset the attempt to estimate the worth (or worthlessness) of others’. The technique that enables Woolf to trace, with unprecedented fineness, curves of complex yet recognizable feelings, approaching and recoiling from merciless judgement, ‘bears witness to an ethical fineness in the technician’. It may be tempting to see Gerald Crich simply as an allegorical character ‘embodying Lawrence’s ideas about what was wrong with modern civilization’ yet the text also invites us to experience a fascinated sympathy with a troubled individual experiencing his own hollowness. O’Neill’s essay shows how the local energies of a text, thanks perhaps to the ineluctable dialogism of the novel, rarely conform to what the critic wants the work to be ‘about’.

While twelve essays can hardly constitute a revised history of English fiction, these offer provocative re-readings of evolutionary moments in the body of the novel, moments, also – since narrative must be ‘a socially symbolic act’ – in the history of conscience and consciousness. Much of what is said in this volume has to do with the variant ways in which novelists have succeeded in devising techniques not only to critique aspects of our social behaviour, but to change it, by burrowing beneath the reader’s mental skin. Art invites the reader, in Wordsworthian phrase, to confront his own ‘pre-established codes of decision’; it may even bring about ‘new compositions of feeling’. The writer’s task, Conrad says, looking back to the manifestos of Wordsworth and of Shelley, is ‘by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*’.⁸ If he succeeds, we may find also, he adds, ‘that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask’. How, why, and under what pressures fictional form evolves, inevitably belongs to cultural history, whether that is seen as a history of compromise and failures, or of social evolution, or of eternal recurrence. Generally speaking, the novel (whatever we may think of the novelist) seems to be one of the good guys, tending toward a more sympathetic and self-aware humanity.

This collection has been designed to offer fresh insights into some of the major constituents of the teaching ‘canon’, and some which challenge admission or readmission, addressing some of the fundamental questions encountered in the study of any novel.

8 RICHARD GRAVIL

Who does the telling? Why is it told the way it is? What does the form mean? In what way is it innovative? What emergent social phenomena required this form of narrative? Why, in the end, does *this* novel matter? What does it invite us to 'see'?

Chapter 1

How pleasant to meet Mr Fielding: The Narrator as Hero in *Tom Jones*

W. B. Hutchings

Well, pleasant for some, less pleasant for others. *Tom Jones* used to be the first topic on the Open University's very successful A204 course, which Bill Ruddick taught in Newcastle upon Tyne for all too brief a time after his early retirement from the Manchester English department. Not renowned for being afraid to express a point of view, Open University students would be both vigorous and varied in their attitudes to the chatty and familiar voice of the narrator of *Tom Jones*. Some found him amusing and engaging, whereas others expressed irritation and even resentment. Some loved the idea of being cheerily accompanied on the stagecoach ride that is Fielding's metaphor for the temporal journey of his story. Others found that the experience had all the pleasure and entertainment of being trapped in a corner by the saloon-bar bore.

Readers who respond so negatively to Mr Fielding can be reassured by the knowledge that one of the great novelists of the twentieth century is on their side. Ford Madox Ford, in his quirky and opinionated essay on *The English Novel*, published in 1930, inveighed heartily against this most intrusive of narrative methods. Writers from Fielding to Thackeray, he said, marred their novels by 'continually brought-in passages of moralizations' and to these Fielding added 'an immense amount of rather nauseous special-pleading'.¹ Ford writes from a technician's point of view. For him, what he termed literary 'impressionism' has the desired effect of conveying the dramatic actuality of a scene or a character. All authorial intrusion should ideally be avoided, the scene being directly presented to readers as if they were themselves witnessing it. An admirer of Samuel Richardson in the familiar battle of the eighteenth-century novelists, and of the French tradition from Flaubert on, Ford objects to Fielding's loose, sloppy narrative. He is offended by the sheer lack of artistry, by Fielding's apparent refusal to treat the novel as a proper work of art rather than a self-indulgent sprawl.

Critical readers are more often offended by the narrator's tone of voice, his nudging the reader familiarly in the ribs, and insisting on his jovial presence. This intrusiveness makes the novel a lot longer than it needs to be. As Johnson said of *Paradise Lost*, nobody ever wished it longer: well, no student, certainly. But more destructive for such readers than this is the effect it has of repeatedly diverting us from what the novel is really about. It is, after all, the story of Tom Jones, an ordinary and frail man who is driven from the unsustainable world of allegory into the realism of England in the mid-eighteenth century. For Paradise Hall, read London. For Adam, read Tom. Or, for

Eve, read Sophia Western. For it is also her story, one of winning through by asserting her integrity and autonomy. This heroine converts her allegorical potential as the bearer of divine knowledge (her name is Greek for ‘wisdom’) into a practical application of principles to a real world, one whose reality is marked by an ethos which threatens all ideals. So why not show us these dramas and conflicts, Mr Fielding, without the unnecessary and irrelevant accompaniment of a host (to use another of his metaphors) loudly dominating proceedings from his hearth?

One solution to this problem, if only a partial one, is to exercise creative censorship. Ford proposed that one could skip the special pleading in the headings of chapters in order to get on with the picaresque story. How many readers have gone further by taking up the narrator’s proffered option of omitting the opening chapters of each volume, in which Fielding steps back from the story to comment in essay form on a variety of matters which take his fancy? That at least removes some of the most obvious of the narrative interjections and speeds up the reading. It is in one of these opening chapters, that to book 5 (*‘Of THE SERIOUS in writing; and for what Purpose it is introduced’*), that Fielding states what the reader may agree with wholeheartedly, even at this early stage:

Peradventure there may be no Parts in this prodigious Work which will give the Reader less Pleasure in the perusing, than those which have given the Author the greatest Pains in composing. Among these probably may be reckoned those initial Essays which we have prefixed to the historical Matter contained in every Book; and which we have determined to be essentially necessary to this kind of Writing, of which we have set ourselves at the Head.²

He goes on to defend these parts of the book on the grounds that every work needs contrast between the serious and the comic. But he allows the reader who is satisfied that the rest of the novel already contains enough of the serious to ‘pass over these, in which we profess to be laboriously dull, and begin the following Books, at the second Chapter’ (1: 5.1.215).

Now all of this is hedged round with very English irony, so giving a comic air to what the narrator professes to be one of the serious sections – a further irony. Fielding, it may be, is being more elusive than at first appears. His odd confession for a writer, that he is aiming to be dull, may be viewed as welcome honesty, but really adds to our suspicion that he is playing with us. How seriously do we take that claim that he has put himself at the head of this kind of writing? Does he mean that he is the first to do it? Not true. Or that he is the best at it? Either way, is his tongue in his cheek? Consider that word ‘prodigious’ which he uses about his novel, with its self-consciously Latinate strutting. The tone here resembles those parts of the novel where he undermines supposed seriousness by comically deflating exaggeration. Here is Squire Allworthy greeting the dawn in style:

It was now the Middle of *May*, and the Morning was remarkably serene, when Mr. *Allworthy* walked forth on the Terrace, where the Dawn opened