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The Structure of *Tom Jones*. Regularity and Extravagance

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To say that *Tom Jones* is remarkable for its structure is a trite saying. Studies on Fielding frequently allude to, or quote, Coleridge's famous statement that *Tom Jones* offers one of "the three most perfect plots ever planned."[1] And every first year student, after reading Fielding's masterpiece, knows that its eighteen books are equally divided into three groups of six books each: the first relates events taking place in the country; the second deals with incidents happening on the London road, whereas the third carries the action to London. An analysis of the novel, even if it is superficial, also shows how skilfully the author handles time and provokes a decelerating process (Books I and II cover fourteen years; Book IV, one year; Book VI, three weeks; Book VII, three days and Book IX, twelve hours) with a corresponding tightening of the dramatic tension. Themes and motifs are inserted and crop up again according to a pattern which betrays a constant attention to order and regularity. Before winning Sophia's hand, Tom has three love-affairs, one in the first part of the novel, one in the middle and one in the London section. There are also symmetrical stories within the story, and a number of parallel or contrasting occurrences placed at equal distance of the pivotal central scene, the Upton episode (Books IX and X). If the plot is examined from that pivotal centre, the organic perfection of the structure is obvious, actions performed before the Upton chapters being mirrored by circumstances happening after.

So evident is Fielding's devotion to regularity that critics seem to make a point of finding original formulas praising what they consider his greatest achievement: tightly-knit structure, consummate artistry, architectonic quality, masterly overall planning, expression of the classical

[1] "Table-Talk", 5 July 1834, *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Rayson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 437.

spirit of the age, systematic organization of contrasts, regularity of Palladian architecture, perfection of a Mozart symphony, etc, etc. An article written in French some twenty years ago and published in the *Nouvelle Revue française* (the author is Michel Cazenave) even declares that *Tom Jones* is so beautifully designed that it becomes the novel of total clearness ("un roman de la clarté totale"); there is nothing mysterious, nothing hidden in it, "aucune trace de ce que Péguy, de si belle manière, nommait un extra-texte."[2]

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The fact that a novel is regarded as one of the greatest books ever written does not justify uncritical admiration. It would be ridiculous, however, not to admit that *Tom Jones* is cleverly planned. Its theatrical devices remind us of some of the stage contrivances of the best comedies of the French classical theatre. Fielding himself gives abundant evidence of his interest in the theoretical principles advocated by Boileau and Rapin and supported in England by Thomas Rymer; he was conscious of the importance of rules. And the predominance of the figure three in *Tom Jones* led some critics to the conclusion that it is not preposterous to establish structural links between Fielding's world and Dante's universe, an interpretation that is not contradicted by some of the proper names chosen by the author: Tom's benefactor, Mr Allworthy, has something of the Almighty in him, which perhaps accounts for his Somerset residence being called Paradise Hall.

But it would be a mistake to insist too heavily on regularity and symmetry. The reader should not focus his thoughts on one aspect only of the working hypothesis that gave birth to *Tom Jones.* Though he greatly admires the classical writers and proclaims that they deserve reverence and obedience, Fielding often rebels against literary theorists. Doctrines are unnecessarily rigid. They should reveal the beauty of a work of art, but in fact underline the "dictatorial power" of critics. For Fielding does not trust critics. Most of them are "men of shallow capacities". They make use of rules as despots wield weapons to legitimate

[2] "A propos de *Tom Jones*", *La Nouvelle Revue française* 12 (Nov. 1964), reprinted in *Henry Fielding und der Englische Roman des 18. Jahrhunderts,* ed. Wolfgang Iser (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), p. 267. On the question under discussion: J. P. Hunter, *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chain of Circumstances* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), and particularly ch. 8 ("Occasion Large and Small: Symmetry and the Limits of Symmetry in *Tom Jones*").

tyranny. Rules are acceptable only if they are founded on truth and nature; the yoke of rules should be thrown off when they do not vindicate beauty but "serve for no other purpose than to curb and restrain genius."[3]

Fielding, like Sterne a few years later, asserts that he has a right to be digressive and extravagant, both adjectives having here their strong etymological Latin meaning. Digression and extravagance soon appear as conscious limitations of the structural economy so frequently praised in *Tom Jones*. Various expedients are adopted by Fielding to unsettle the apparent harmony of the general pattern.

To begin with, let us mention the author's ironic and disrespectful playfulness. It sometimes manifests itself in the heading of chapters. Normally a title is a way of telling the reader where he stands and helping him see the plan followed by the writer. Fielding intentionally misleads the reader by suggesting that some of the chapters are useless: "Containing little or nothing", "Containing five pages of paper", "Too short to need a Preface". Such titles are examples of what I might call Fielding's humorous escapism: how to reject the strictures of order without impairing the general structure of the novel.

Critics are wont to say that the different sections of *Tom Jones* are held together by repeated references to the same object or by the intervention of recurring themes: Sophia's muff, Tom's bank note, curtains in bedrooms; the punishment, pursuit and rescue motifs. In fact, even though they are pattern-making elements, such clues are deceptive. They are supposed to emphasize structure; they also bring about the doubts that create dramatic imbroglios. An example will help me establish what I mean: the role of the correspondence exchanged by the different characters, particularly in the London chapters. Letters are usually sent to convey information; they are written for the sake if not of truth, at least of clarity. In *Tom Jones*, letters (epistolary dispositions are perceptible in Sophia, Lady Bellastron, Honour, Mrs Hunt, Mr Allworthy, Tom, and several others) seldom contribute to the immediate triumph of truth; in many cases, they are a source of misunderstanding and confusion; their emotional colouring is not perceived with the same intensity by the persons who send and those who receive them; they sometimes reach their destination too soon or too late; and above all, they may be used with unscrupulous cunning: the letter in which Tom proposes marriage to Lady Bellaston provokes unforeseen reactions. Letters apparently have the same role as phone-calls today: their increasing number does not improve the quality of human understanding.

[3] *Tom Jones*, Book V, ch. 1 (Penguin Ed., p. 200).

Oral communication is also the origin of several errors. Characters are deceived by words. A good deal of what they hear or say is pure gossip. They are dazzled by the face-value of utterances. Any reader who tries to sum up the plot of *Tom Jones* is compelled to make use of the vocabulary of pretence or deception. He cannot avoid phrases such as "he assumed", "he was led to believe", "his apparent kindness", "an air of piety", "the wrong impression that ...", "The false report that ...". All things considered, he realizes that the plot is pushed forward by inaccurate interpretations. All the characters, at one time or another, show their lack of critical wisdom. Tom, in book V, believes that Molly Seagrim is genuinely in love with him and that he is responsible for her pregnancy. Sophia often suspects that other characters know more than they do. Now and again Mr Allworthy's natural sagacity is compromised by fits of incredible gullibility. Mr Western is easily fooled by his sister, his friends or members of his household; his pursuing a fox at the beginning of book XII, instead of following his daughter on her way to London, does not simply prove that he is the typical landowner with a passion for hunting; the incident has a symbolic significance: it shows the importance of "wandering" or "erring" as one of the key motifs of the whole novel. Extravagance (here again taken with its etymological connotations) is the word to be used.

In *Tom Jones,* we are in a world of make-believe. Mystification frequently outweighs truth. Some critics will probably attribute Fielding's propensity to distort the image of reality to his years of intense activity as a playwright and repeat that many episodes in *Tom Jones* are visibly theatrical with the unlikelihood and the use of contrasts, repetitions and reversals which are the essence of comedies or farcical interludes. I am not sure that Fielding's adaptations of Molière and his own plays are the real genesis of Fielding's masterly disorder in *Tom Jones.* I would rather say that a better explanation is provided by the spirit of the age as it is illustrated by some aspects of 18th century architecture.

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I am not referring here to the interpretation defended by Frederick W. Hilles in his *Art and Artifice in Tom Jones,*[4] where he postulates that the three main parts of Fielding's novel partly reproduce three sides of Prior

[4] Frederick W. Hilles, "Art and Artifice in *Tom Jones*", *Imagined Worlds: Essays on Some English Novels and Novelists in Honour of John Butt,* Eds. Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor (London: Methuen, 1968), pp. 91–110.

Park, the stately house of Fielding's patron, Ralph Allen, as it had been designed by John Wood, the famous architect known as "Wood of Bath". To my mind, Hilles's argument does not carry conviction. Moreover it would only tend to emphasize the classical symmetry of *Tom Jones*, a fact so obvious that no one will venture to deny its veracity. My contention is that Fielding was influenced by contradictory tendencies: by Palladian sobriety, but also by baroque exuberance; the twisted columns of some new churches and the massive pillars of neo-classical architecture; broken pediments and the triangular fronts of pseudo-temples; wide windows opening on luminous landscapes and concealed casements indirectly revealed by the oblique sunbeams they give admittance to; imposing portals and painted entrances which prove to be sham doors. And also billowing clouds and realistically drawn alcoves, suggestive of depth where reality offers only a simple, plain surface; reflecting mirrors creating an illusion of endlessness ... Reality may contradict the first preception of the eye. Dreams may be more valid than blank facts; running water more expressive than stable stone.

Houses and mansions built for the aristocracy under the first Georges, though often traditionally classical in their general planning, sometimes reflect a vague desire for a new form of wealth. The peace and smoothness that create taste are troubled by unexpected undercurrents, like the surface of a lake ruffled by a sudden breeze. Harmony and symmetry are no longer sufficient to define beauty. "There is nothing in Nature that is great and beautiful, without Rule and Order", John Dennis had written a few decades before, "and the more Rule and Order, and Harmony, we find in the Objects that strike our Senses, the more Worthy and Noble we esteem them."[5] And Pope, though he did not like Dennis, whom he attacked in *The Dunciad*, had also praised the quality of well-proportioned architecture:

> No monstrous height, or breadth, or length, appear;
> The Whole at once is bold, and regular.[6]

By the middle of the century, the vision is no longer the same. Taste does not necessarily reject eccentricity. There may be nobleness in Gothic singularity. Nature can be improved by those *chinoiseries* which

[5] Quoted by A. R. Humphreys, *The Augustan World: Life and Letters in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Methuen, 1954), p. 223. On literature and visual arts in the 18th century: John Stegmann, *The Rule of Taste: From George I to George IV* (London: Macmillan, 1936); J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: 17th and 18th Centuries* (London: Methuen, 1966).

[6] *Essay on Criticism*, lines 251–252.

in France had been revealed by the genius of Watteau. Elegance is not marred by the presence of a ruined tower in a park. What is apparently incongruous may give a castle or an abbey its intrinsic life. Robert Adam, the great architect, and his brother James had insisted on the role of movement, which is "the rise and fall, the advance and the recess, with other diversity of form, in the different parts of a building, so as to add greatly to the picturesque of the composition."[7] A new conception of architectural refinement was being developed, with the irruption of a form of dynamic extravagance animating the traditional stability of masses. In 1747, two years before the publication of *Tom Jones*, Horace Walpole bought Strawberry Hill, near Twickenham, and made it into an imitation of a Gothic building. At the same time, an alhambra, a pagoda and a mosque were erected in the gardens of Kew. In order to define these alterations of the classical taste, various by-roads must be explored; and in such an investigation, we stumble upon concepts and words which, without being synonyms, concurred to produce a new artistic code: baroque and rococo, gothic and oriental, grotesque and burlesque, picturesque and sublime.

Was Fielding really conscious of the importance of such changes? Though he keeps repeating that his masters are the great writers of Athens and Rome, he was probably seduced by the new aspirations of his own time. His ideal house does not offer the Palladian regularity John Wood recommended when he designed Ralph Allen's stately house. It had, like Fielding's major novel, unconventional outgrowths. Fielding rarely speaks of external nature in *Tom Jones*. But he carefully describes Paradise Hall, Mr Allworthy's residence:

> The Gothick stile of building could produce nothing nobler than Mr Allworthy's house. There was an air of grandeur in it, that struck you with awe, and rival'd the beauties of the best Grecian architecture; and it was as commodious within, as venerable without.
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> It stood on the south-east side of a hill, but nearer the bottom than the top of it, so as to be sheltered from the north-east by a grove of old oaks, which rose above it in a gradual ascent of near half a mile, and yet high enough to enjoy a most charming prospect of the valley beneath.
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> In the midst of the grove was a fine lawn, sloping down towards the house, near the summit of which rose a plentiful spring, gushing out of a rock covered with firs, and forming a constant cascade of about thirty foot, not carried down a regular flight of steps, but tumbling in a natural fall over the broken and mossy stones, till it came to the bottom of the rock; then running off in a pebly channel, that with many lesser falls winded along, till it fell into a lake at the foot of the hill, about a quarter of a mile below the house on the

[7] Humphreys, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

> south side, and which was seen from every room in the front. Out of this lake, which filled the center of a beautiful plain, embellished with groupes of beeches and elms, and fed with sheep, issued a river, that, for several miles, was seen to meander through an amazing variety of meadows and woods, till it emptied itself into the sea; with a large arm of which, and an island beyond it, the prospect was closed.
>
> On the right of this valley opened another of less extent, adorned with several villages, and terminated by one of the towers of an old ruined abbey, grown over with ivy, and part of the front, which remained still entire.
>
> The left hand scene presented the view of a very fine park, composed of very unequal ground, and agreeably varied with all the diversity that hills, lawns, wood, and water, laid out with admirable taste, but owing less to art than to nature, could give. Beyond this the country gradually rose into a ridge of wild mountains, the tops of which were above the clouds.[8]

Fielding's dream of the perfect dwelling-place – his earthly Paradise – does not obey the rules of symmetry and harmony defended by the classical theorists. It has no architectural unity, being Gothic outside and Grecian inside, uniting the opulence of stately mansions and the charm of ruined abbeys. The park has little in common with the *jardins à la française* so lavishly admired on the Continent; it has its own informal singularity, which results from the freedom granted to nature and the apparent absence of restraint in the treatment of ground and water as architectural material.

Placed at the beginning of *Tom Jones*, the description of Mr Allworthy's country house seems to indicate how the pages and chapters that follow should be interpreted. It warns the reader against the dangers of a one-sided analysis. Paradise Hall proclaims the "admirable taste" of its master, but discards any form of intolerance, just as Tom, who embodies benevolence, sometimes succumbs to "a tendency to vice"[9] without losing the reader's sympathy. A balanced perception of values, either artistic or moral, is gained only through experience and not by listening to the pedantic lessons of narrow-minded philosophers and critics.

"Every book", Fielding says in *Tom Jones*, "ought to be read with the same spirit, and in the same manner, as it is writ."[10] The spirit that inspired his novel more than two centuries ago and still animates its plot is an original amalgamation of the reverence for the neo-classical principles of the Augustan age and a vital craving for new forms of intellectual and sentimental intoxication. This blending is the root and essence of Fielding's realism.

[8] *Tom Jones*, Book I, ch. 4 (Penguin Ed., pp. 58–59).
[9] *Ibid.*, Book XVIII, Chapter the Last (Penguin Ed., p. 873).
[10] *Ibid.*, Book IV, ch. 1 (Penguin Ed., p. 151).