



Fictional Absence - Chapter 2: The Eighteenth Century

Pete Lowman

In *Fictional Absence*, which has been slightly revised for publication here, Pete Lowman considers the presence and absence of God in English literature.

Contents (links will be added as each chapter becomes available):

[Appendix I: The Possibility of Providence](#)

Chapter Two: The Eighteenth Century

(i) 'Pamela'

As we look at the major novels of the eighteenth century, we can see the continuing loss of God in English prose fiction.

Samuel Richardson's extremely long story Pamela is a convenient point to begin. It concerns a servant girl who is kidnapped and threatened (at great length) with rape, but finally softens her captor's heart and marries him. It is a fiction retaining a strong sense of providentialism. But unfortunately Pamela – like Moll Flanders – presents providence largely in connection with the laying up of treasure on earth; though her creator has a strong desire to keep her on the right side of the moral law, as he sees it.

The first page of the narrative presents Pamela writing to her parents:

God, whose graciousness to us we have so often experienced, put it into my good lady's heart, just an hour before she expired, to recommend to my

young master all her servants, one by one... And these were some of her last words. O how my eyes run! Don't wonder to see the paper so blotted.

Such expressions might appear to be mere commonplaces of speech, but this is belied by the sheer extent to which Pamela resorts to a mental dependence on God in her predicament: 'And so I will only say, pray for your Pamela' [8]

Once again it is not altogether easy for a modern reader to recognise the full content of these phrases, that in a less secularised culture they are not mere platitudes but represent an assertion that the power of God can be relied upon for deliverance, in the face of human probability and in defiance of the powers of this world. 'Pray for poor Pamela', she writes to her parents after being carried off to Lincolnshire; and indeed 'having enquired of all their acquaintance what could be done, and no one being able to put them in a way how to proceed, on so extraordinary an occasion, against so rich and resolute a gentleman... they applied themselves to prayers.' [9] This is realistic enough: prayer is something that the oppressed can 'apply themselves to', and one of the points that Richardson seeks to make in the novel as a whole is that virtue is not defenceless and will in truth be rewarded. This he makes clear in his summary of morals to be drawn at the close of the First Part:

Let the desponding heart be comforted by the happy issue which the troubles and trials of PAMELA met with, when they see that no danger or distress, however inevitable or deep, to their apprehensions, is out of the power of providence to obviate or relieve; and that, too, at a time when all human prospects seem to fail. [10]

The objective reality of providence may be demonstrated from its interplay with human action. Richardson was reacting against the romance tradition, and hence shy of anything approaching the miraculous. Consequently, divine grace is often portrayed in his work as operating through and interwoven with human thought. The episode where Pamela contemplates committing suicide is an example of this. Pamela reasons through the eternal consequences of suicide in a logical process of thought. But there is also the suggestion that both God and the devil are affecting these thoughts: 'That thought was surely

of the devil's instigation; for it was very soothing and powerful with me' is the way she describes her fantasies [11], and later she exhorts herself:

While thou hast power left thee, avoid the tempting evil, lest thy grand enemy, now repulsed by Divine Grace, and due reflection, return to the assault with a force that thy weakness may not be able to resist!... Though I should have praised God for my deliverance, had I been freed from my wicked keepers, and my designing master, yet I have more abundant reason to praise him, that I have been delivered from a worse enemy, myself. [12]

The modern reader may understand the first sentence cited here as nothing more than 'Get away from temptation in case the idea returns to your mind.' But to Richardson's Pamela, there are supernatural forces at work too; 'Divine Grace and due reflection' are both operative. As in any theology influenced by the attitude exemplified in Proverbs 3:5, 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding', the human mind is here seen as a fallen and fallible organ, capable of accurate decision-making with the aid of 'Divine Grace', but under pressure too from hidden but malignant forces. Pamela can give the name 'myself' to mental processes that would have led her to drown herself; that was where her own thoughts led her, while in contrast the logical process by which she moved away from that option is itself a 'deliverance' for which she should praise God as the prime agent: 'I will tell you my conflicts on this dreadful occasion, that the Divine Mercies may be magnified in my deliverance.' [14] The reality of divine influence on the human mind is the presence of the incalculable, and prevents despair.)

In these cases, the action of 'Divine Grace' is more or less identified with Pamela's thought processes. But on the other hand, Richardson presents grace as active also in the orchestration of events as a whole. And the extent to which grace runs contrary to human expectation is an indication of the degree to which we should understand it as an objective reality:

Henceforth let not us poor short-sighted mortals pretend to rely on our own wisdom; or vainly think, that we are absolutely to direct for ourselves. I have great reason to say, that, when I was most disappointed, I was nearer my

happiness: for had I made my escape, which was so often my chief point in view, and what I had placed my heart upon, I had escaped the blessings now before me, and fallen, perhaps, into the miseries I would have avoided. And yet after all, it was necessary I should take the steps I did, to bring on this wonderful turn: O the unsearchable wisdom of God! [15]

The objectivity of grace here means that it can bring about precisely the opposite of what the human probabilities would suggest (had Pamela escaped, she would have forfeited her eventual happiness); and yet it is not separate from, but rather working through, the human agent (it is through Pamela's resistance that her captor is softened: her resistance brings about God's purposes, although it does not accomplish her own goal of escape).

It seems, then, that Richardson, who brought a new degree of psychological insight to the novel (eg. his depiction of Pamela's ambivalent feelings towards her captor), brought to it also a supernaturalistic vision in which the human psyche was open to, and part of, spiritual warfare and providential purposes. Richardson's overriding moral purpose in writing fiction (Clarissa, he claimed, in that book's postscript, was intended to 'steal in... the great doctrines of Christianity under a fashionable amusement', since 'when the Pulpit fails other expedients are necessary') causes him to adopt a causality that owes more to the Puritans than to the Enlightenment, and nothing at all to neo-classicism.

But, again, it did not establish a providentially-oriented tradition of significance to the novel's development. A major cause presumably is those deficiencies in his vision which have earned him much critical disgust. Virtue is rewarded in Pamela (though not in Clarissa) in thoroughly earthly terms: one wonders whether Richardson gave any thought while writing it to the reasons why Paul and the apostles ended up as martyrs rather than millionaires. His spirituality here is all too closely akin to that of Moll Flanders. Again, the providential scheme is too tidy: at the end of the First Part providence has completed its business, the moral lessons from its actions in the lives of 'Mr WILLIAMS... good old ANDREWS and his WIFE... Miss GODFREY' [16] are all plain to see, and there are no loose ends. That lacks

realism: Christian theology promises no such neat arrangement until the Second Coming.

But thirdly, there is Richardson's preoccupation with rape in both Pamela and Clarissa. Dorothy Van Ghent blames it on the Puritan element in Richardson's cultural background: 'In the Puritan mythology sex is the culmination of all evil, the unmasked face of fear.' [19], but because the spiritual universe of Bunyan's Puritanism was far broader than the narrow arena in which Richardson's morbid obsession places his heroines. If Richardson had been closer to Bunyan's Puritanism he might well have been less myopic rather than more; but by the mid-eighteenth century the Puritan heritage had lost much of its power. At any rate, there is something unhealthy and restricted about Richardson's vision.

Taking these points together, then, Richardson's model of providence at work is not one that could be expected to establish a lasting tradition of any great significance.

(ii) 'Tom Jones'

Richardson's contemporary Fielding was a writer who did not share Richardson's apparent morbidity; and in his work too there remains a hint of providential overruling underlying purely naturalistic events. But it is not a pattern of deliverance in answer to prayer such as appears in Pamela. Rather, Fielding's approach in Tom Jones is to create a comic pattern whereby the coincidences of a carefully-contrived plot bring about a happy ending; and this, he suggests, is the work of a 'Fortune' that corresponds to a fundamentally beneficent divine ordering of the real universe.

The plot of Tom Jones includes numerous such coincidences: the meeting of the Man of the Hill with his father [25]; and so on. Fielding remarks at one point that

...certain it is, there are some incidents in life so very strange and unaccountable, that it seems to require more than human skill and foresight in producing them. Of this kind was what now happened to Jones, who found Mr Nightingale the elder in so critical a minute, that Fortune, if she was really worthy all the worship she received at Rome, could not have contrived such another. [26]

All these are the contrivances of a consciously non-realistic work of art. And yet they bear an oblique relation to reality: Fielding's reference here to 'some incidents in life' indicates that some sort of parallel is intended to exist between what he is describing and the real world. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are several points in the fiction – contexts that are not especially 'low' or comic, particularly utterances by Allworthy – when instead of referring to 'Fortune' he suggests that the real 'final cause' behind the development and patterning of events is 'Providence':

<blockquote style="margin-right: 0px;" dir="ltr">
Here an accident happened of a very extraordinary kind; one indeed of those strange chances, whence very good and grave men have concluded that Providence often interposes in the discovery of the most secret villainy, in order to caution men from quitting the paths of honesty, however warily they tread in those of vice. [27]

'I need not, madam,' said Allworthy, 'express my astonishment at what you have told me... Good Heaven! Well! the Lord disposeth all things.' [28]

And, in a passage of great topical significance in a book published just four years after the 1745 rebellion:

I had been for some time very seriously affected with the danger to which the Protestant religion was so visibly exposed, that nothing but the immediate interposition of Providence seemed capable of preserving it. [29]

It seems reasonable, then, to conclude with Martin Battestin that:

The design of Tom Jones mirrors a similar Order ... in Fielding's universe. Another, equally celebrated feature of the book, the omniscient narrator himself, functions, as both Thackeray and Wayne Booth have observed, as a kind of surrogate providence in the world of the novel, whose wit and wisdom we rely on and whose intrusions into the story keep us constantly aware of the shaping intelligence that arranges and governs all contingencies and will bring the characters at last to their just rewards... As the divines whom Fielding read and admired were at pains to make clear ... it is Providence, not

Fortune, that contrives the extraordinary casualties of life. The happy accidents and surprising reversals in Fielding's novel remind us of the manipulating intelligence of the author who conducts the story, as those in real life are signs of the Deity's providential care. [30]

The concept of the author as surrogate providence is no invention of Thackeray or Wayne Booth. Fielding himself articulates it:

<blockquote style="margin-right: 0px;" dir="ltr">
This work may, indeed, be considered as a great creation of our own.... The allusion and metaphor we have here made use of, we must acknowledge to be infinitely too great for our occasion, but there is, indeed, no other, which is at all adequate to express the difference between an author of the first rate, and a critic of the lowest. [31]

However, the parallel between 'Fortune' in Fielding's novel and the providential ordering in real life is not unambiguous. It is obvious from several of the references to 'Fortune' that, whatever overall pattern may be meant by this notion, in any specific context it can refer to a capricious accident, rather than an act of God:

Mr Fitzpatrick ... flew directly upstairs ... and unluckily (as Fortune loves to play tricks with those gentlemen who put themselves entirely under her conduct) ran his head against several doors and posts to no purpose. [34]

That the specific references to 'Fortune' are not intended to represent a direct parallel to the nature of providence in reality may also be deduced from Fielding's criticisms of Richardson, as Battestin points out:

<blockquote style="margin-right: 0px;" dir="ltr">
The events in the novel ultimately lead toward a comic Apocalypse – that last, improbable, joyous catastrophe in which true identities are discovered, the innocent redeemed, an unerring justice meted out to one and all. How is it, then, that one of the absurdities of Pamela that Fielding ridiculed was Richardson's insistence that virtue was rewarded in this world? 'A very wholesome and comfortable doctrine', Fielding remarked in Tom Jones (XV.i), 'to which we have but one objection, namely that it is not true'. Why, one may well ask, should the happy conclusion of Fielding's own fiction be considered any less intellectually reprehensible than that of Pamela? The answer is implicit in what we have been saying so far about the relation of form to

meaning in Tom Jones. Whereas Richardson offers Pamela to us as a literal transcription of reality, Fielding's intention is ultimately symbolic.... Ultimately he asks us to consider not Tom Jones, but 'HUMAN NATURE', not so much the particular story of one man's fall and redemption, as the rational and benign scheme of things which the story and its witty, genial author imply. [35]

Indeed, in the passage Battestin cites, Fielding derides the doctrine that 'virtue is the certain road to happiness' as both un-Christian and false ('We have in our voyage through life seen so many other exceptions to it' [37] As a good neo-classicist, he is depicting the universal, not the particular; and the relation between the pattern he indicates and the realities of the lives of individuals is unspecified.

The fact that he is a neo-classicist has two other results. It means that his characters are static 'types' rather than individuals in their own right, and consequently do not have the ability to develop in the way that would be necessary if they were to be depicted in a dynamic relationship with providence. [39] It would not have been easy for Fielding to take the forms of the classical tradition and force their characters to develop under the hand of providence in a way presupposing the concerns of the Judaeo-Christian worldview.

Fielding's neo-classicism also involved something of the 'segregation of styles', which meant that his choice of comedy as his form hindered the use of Christian supernaturalism in his subject-matter. [40] In the Preface to Joseph Andrews he remarks that the comic romance such as he is writing:

differs from the serious romance in its fable and action, in this; that as in the one these are grave and solemn, so in the other they are light and ridiculous: it differs in its characters by introducing persons of inferior rank, and consequently, of inferior manners, whereas the grave romance sets the highest before us.

So, at the close of that preface, he feels the need to apologise for introducing a clergyman into 'the low adventures in which he is engaged'; and it becomes plain why he felt he could not 'introduce

into his works any of that heavenly host which make a part of his creed', as he remarks in Tom Jones. [42]

It is noticeable, too, that he states a deliberate intention not to explore the causality underlying his narrative events; when relating a marked change in Partridge's circumstances, Fielding comments that 'as we are very far from believing in any such heathen goddess' as a personified Nemesis,

...so we wish Mr John Fr--, or some other such philosopher, would bestir himself a little, in order to find out the real cause of this sudden transition, from good to bad fortune... for it is our province to relate facts, and we shall leave causes to persons of much higher genius. [43]

These tongue-in-cheek remarks confirm that while the pattern of 'Fortune' in Tom Jones matches Fielding's belief in the overall beneficence of providence, it is not intended to represent a providential causality behind individual events as they take place in the real world. Fielding's basic beliefs are not given any close working out in the lives of his characters. Such a 'supernatural realism' was not his purpose.

(iii) Amelia

It is striking to see how Fielding's approach had altered by the time he published Amelia in 1751. Amelia may be said to be a less neo-classical and more deliberately 'realistic' novel than Tom Jones. The long authorial disquisitions, drawing attention to the fictive nature of the work, have largely disappeared; the names tend to be ordinary names rather than the 'typical' kind that many characters in Tom Jones possessed [44]; and the depiction of London as experienced by a family in straitened circumstances has the flavour of daily life. It is, interesting, therefore, that this closer relation to realism is accompanied by a clearer use of a Christian concept of providence.

On the novel's very first page, Fielding distances himself from the use of 'Fortune' that underlay the coincidence-based plot of Tom Jones:

The distresses which they waded through were some of them so exquisite, and the incidents which produced these so extraordinary, that they seemed to require not only the utmost malice, but the utmost invention, which superstition hath ever attributed to Fortune: though whether any such

being interfered in the case, or, indeed, whether there be any such being in the universe, is a matter which I by no means presume to determine in the affirmative. To speak a bold truth, I am, after much deliberation, inclined to suspect that the public voice hath, in all ages, done much injustice to Fortune, and hath convicted her of many facts in which she had not the least concern. [45]

At this point, he affirms instead the importance of 'natural means' and the extent to which people follow 'the directions of Prudence'. Within a few pages, however, we find his hero Booth in prison, and there the idea of providence emerges; the first villainous character he encounters is one in part marked out by his being 'a deist, or, perhaps, an atheist; for, though he did not absolutely deny the existence of a God, yet he entirely denied his providence.' [46]

As the novel progresses it becomes clear that faith in providence is to be set over against attitudes based around fortune. To speak of fortune is to speak superficially [50]

In fact the character who gives her name to the book, and whose unblemished nature is the anchor for her family's survival, is sustained throughout by a strong faith in the overruling of providence. When Booth has to go abroad in the army, he finds the grief-stricken Amelia 'on her knees, a posture in which I never disturbed her' [54] (It is perhaps Amelia's strength of feeling – even though it makes her over-prone to swooning – and her expressive affection for her husband, that keep her from appearing a colourlessly perfect saint-figure.)

Her faith finds its mentor in Dr. Harrison, the clergyman who is in the end the architect of Booth's escape from misfortune. Again, it is important to note that this man who proves a wise guide and effective rescuer in life's misfortunes grounds his own conduct on faith in the eternal world. His letter to Booth in Paris challenges him that it is when 'we are not in earnest in our faith' that we become troubled by our experience of 'temporary and short transitory evils' – though Harrison knows he is acting the radical in saying so: 'If one of my cloth should begin a discourse of heaven ... at Garraway's, or at White's; would he gain a hearing... would he not presently acquire the name of the mad parson?' [57]). It is such a

man, Fielding insists throughout *Amelia*, who is best able to find his way through the complexities of the social universe that is depicted with grainy realism in the novel.

There is, indeed, an awareness that providence has its unfathomable complexities. Mrs. Atkinson, recalling her own experience of seduction, speaks of her discovery of the attempted betrayal of *Amelia* as 'mere accident... unless there are some guardian angels that in general protect innocence and virtue; though I may say, I have not always found them so watchful.' [60] The result of Robinson's confession is that good triumphs, evil is unmasked, and *Amelia* comes at last into her rightful property.

Amelia's story, the doctor suggests, is a paradigm, an example of the providential purposes being completed in a visible manner in this world, rather than being left ambiguous as may occur in other instances: 'Providence hath done you the justice at last which it will, one day or other, render to all men.' [62] But the classical heritage is here being used to testify to the certainty of divine providence active in the real world.

An outburst of praise to the Christian God is *Amelia's* response to her deliverance, as we might expect; not casually, either, but 'falling on her knees' once again. [64] He has shown us the deeper perspective; but this is a story, not a sermon; better, therefore, to close on the casual note, given that it has already been made quite clear how events are really organized.

Fielding died three years after *Amelia*. In this his last novel, therefore, we can see how his deepening moral concern and his increased interest in the realistic depiction of 'true history' come together in a novel of ordinary life based on a clear providentialism. But the future did not lie that way. As saint-figures go, the resolute yet passionate *Amelia* is not unattractive. But it is less easy to write a colourful novel about such a figure than about a picaresque and promiscuous rogue like *Tom Jones*. Fielding had a partial solution to this problem, in that much of *Amelia's* most interesting action happens to her husband; she and Dr. Harrison pray, trust, encourage, explain, and simply go on living. But as the centrepiece character, the title character, of a book, *Tom*

Jones has the stronger power. Fielding's earlier, picaresque novel, with its much vaguer commitment to the actions of providence in the real world, was the one to be more central in the English novel's developing tradition.

(iv) Goldsmith and Smollett

Fielding's practice is similar to that of some other eighteenth-century authors. Oliver Goldsmith, the author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, can be seen as standing in the neo-classical tradition, and he does not attempt a realism of the kind that marks *Robinson Crusoe* or *Pamela*. However, *The Vicar of Wakefield* is closer to them than is *Tom Jones*. Goldsmith does not scruple to portray a clergyman in his narrative (although, indeed, the narrative is not as 'low' as some parts of Fielding); and there is a much clearer reference to providence. [70] Indeed, even in jail he seeks to accomplish God's work (and be a good Augustan) by bringing order to the society within the prison; some passages that are both humorous and realistic follow as Goldsmith describes his attempts to get the prisoners' attention. The loss of his last hope, when his son appears as a prisoner guilty of a capital offence, is itself made a pretext for a sermon on providence, that he hopes will have a powerful effect on the prisoners.

The fact that *Primrose* suffers both from naïveté and intellectual pride (but to an extent that is gently comic rather than obnoxious) serves to make him and his attitudes acceptable, in a way that would not be so if he were a total paragon of virtue and wisdom. Indeed, Goldsmith presents both *Primrose* and his wife expressing their confidence in the protection of providence at exactly the wrong moment, immediately before a catastrophe. [71] This much weakness is necessary to make *Primrose* tolerable.

Overall, his faith in God is conveyed sufficiently strikingly to mean that, when the denouement comes and the family's fortunes are restored, *Primrose's* own providential and worshipping interpretation of the situation seems to be the right one.

However, the numerous improbabilities on which Goldsmith's comic denouement depends [73] The basic appropriateness of a providential worldview is expressed, but not what that means in

everyday reality.

Providentialism is conspicuous by its absence from much other eighteenth-century fiction. It is significant that the hero of Johnson's *Rasselas* makes his extensive investigations into the meaning of existence and the 'choice of life' [75] And in Smollett the absence is clearer still. Most of Smollett's fiction is picaresque, comic, non-idealist – very definitely on the 'lower' side of the 'segregation of styles'. But the picture that results seems virtually to imply a metaphysic. As Leopold Damrosch remarks,

Roderick Random... puts its unlovable hero through a series of disasters and recoveries that are as random as the title suggests, and ends by conferring wealth, a wife, and a long-lost father he has done nothing to deserve. The tale eventually gets somewhere, but not for any good reason; the hero eventually learns something, but not much... Roderick inhabits a Lucretian universe of ceaseless change that is at once random and determined: random in that it responds only to the swerving and rebounding of atom against atom in their fall through the void; determined in that every rebound leads to another rebound, and there is thus plenty of causation even though no presiding principle organizes the whole. [76]

The 'segregation of styles' may be only a formal principle, but comedy of Smollett's kind creates a vision of a certain kind of amoral, patternless world: in much of his work, as Alastair Duckworth says, 'Life is assumed to lack order.' [77]

A somewhat mellow picture of the world is to be found in *Humphry Clinker*, which appeared at the end of Smollett's life; and here belief in providence is given rather more treatment. But such a faith is still either mocked or patronised as a belief fit only for the weak minds of women or of servants (such as Humphry Clinker himself, who is a keen Methodist): for example, in Mrs Jenkins' disastrously-misspelled letters:

Ould Scratch has not a greater enemy upon earth than Mr Clinker, who is, indeed, a very powerful labourer in the Lord's vineyard. I do no more than use the words of my good lady, who has got the infectual calling; and I trust that even myself, though unworthy, shall find grease to be excepted. [78]

Likewise among the upper classes: 'my good lady', Tabitha Bramble, is as fervent a Wesleyan as her servant, but all too obviously her faith is

part of her matrimonial schemes [82] A good example is Jery's attitude after they have all narrowly escaped drowning on the Firth. (During the crisis the servants have turned to 'prayer and ejaculation'; Matthew Bramble, in contrast, 'sat, collected in himself, without speaking.')

To be sure (cried Tabby, when she found herself on terra firma), we must all have perished, if we had not been the particular care of Providence.' 'Yes (replied my uncle), but I am much of the honest highlander's mind – after he had made such a passage as this: his friend told him he was much indebted to Providence;– "Certainly (said Donald), but, by my saul, mon, I'se ne'er trouble Providence again, so long as the brig of Stirling stands." [83]

Rather more ugly is the incident where Bramble and Jery find the other members of their household at a Methodist chapel hearing Clinker, the footman, preach. Jery comments that Humphry led the singing 'with peculiar graces', but nonetheless 'I could hardly keep my gravity on this ludicrous occasion'; and what strikes Bramble 'was the presumption of his lacquey, whom he commanded to come down, with such an air of authority as Humphry did not think proper to disregard... My uncle, with a sneer, asked pardon of the ladies for having interrupted their devotion, saying, he had particular business with the preacher, whom he ordered to call a hackney-coach.' In the subsequent interview Bramble demands, 'What right has such a fellow as you to set up for a reformer?', and browbeats Clinker into a denial of his sense of calling. Bramble himself is treated slightly ironically by Smollett, but there can be little doubt that he and Jery are being presented as the most sensible participants in the incident; Clinker's co-religionist, Mrs Tabitha, does their cause no good by callously criticising him when he backs down. [84]

In fact in preaching to Clinker 'the light of reason, which you don't pretend to follow' [89] One example of this ambivalence is Smollett's presentation of a scene in which Clinker is mistakenly arrested; while in jail he brings about a virtual revival among the prisoners, in a manner similar to Goldsmith's Mr Primrose:

The turnkey ... looked remarkably sullen; and when we enquired for Clinker, 'I don't care, if the

devil had him (said he); here has been nothing but canting and praying since the fellow entered the place – Rabbit him! the tap will be ruined – we han't sold a cask of beer, nor a dozen of wine, since he paid his garnish – the gentlemen get drunk with nothing but your damned religion... Two or three as bold hearts as ever took the air on Hounslow, have been blubbering all night; and if the fellow an't speedily removed by Habeas Corpus, or otherwise, I'll be damned if there's a grain of true spirit left within these walls.'

Jery's own description of the scene makes clear that all this is 'not for him'; and he uses the colourful vocabulary appropriate to ridicule – but there is something too genuine for him to press the attack home:

I never saw any thing so strongly picturesque as this congregation of felons clanking their chains, in the midst of whom stood orator Clinker, expatiating in a transport of fervor, on the torments of hell, denounced in scripture against evil-doers, comprehending murderers, robbers, thieves and whore mongers. The variety of attention exhibited in the faces of those ragamuffins, formed a group that would not have disgraced the pencil of a Raphael. In one, it denoted admiration; in another, doubt; in a third, disdain; in a fourth, contempt; in a fifth, terror... The gaoler's wife declared he was a saint in trouble, saying, she wished from her heart there was such another good soul, like him, in every gaol in England. [90]

The challenge Clinker poses to Smollett's world is not an insignificant one – he is, after all, the book's title character. But in the end, Smollett declines to endorse the radicalism Clinker stands for, even though he recognises in it a goodness of genuine power: in Smollett's world the truly shrewd are too clever to take on board the faith of the Methodists. It must be left to the women and the servants. And so the providence Clinker believes in remains, once again, absent from the structure of the narrative.

Nor does providential faith find much more expression in the fiction of Sterne, vicar though he was. The general ethos of *Tristram Shandy* may reflect an easy-going belief; but the task of establishing any real engagement between his book and the world of reality remains (entertainingly) beyond *Tristram's* grasp. Hence, no close working-out of providentialism in the

everyday can be attempted in it. But in these instances where no such working-out exists, the result can all too easily be the kind of divorce between the general credal statement about God's activity on the one hand, and its grounding in any practical particulars on the other, that writers like Francis Schaeffer have seen as a key problem in the theological thinking of the modern era. [92] It becomes less and less clear what 'living by faith' means in the mundane world. For practical purposes life is to be seen in a naturalistic way. And that is the picture presented by the novel as the century proceeds.

(iv) Latitudinarianism and the Anti-Romance Reaction

We should finally note two other factors in the eighteenth-century milieu that may have been of significance in accentuating the novel's loss of God: the dominance of Latitudinarianism in religion, and the reaction against the romancers.

Latitudinarianism was a movement within Anglican theology that was a significant influence on Fielding and Sterne in particular. [93] It tended to stress charity above (and therefore as distinct from) dogma; in reaction, no doubt, to the violent doctrinal warfare of the previous century, the dogmatism of which had often been far from charitable. But this emphasis tended to devalue and marginalize concern for the believer's relationship with the supernatural realities of his faith. Latitudinarianism was very much a creed of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on a rationally-based morality, and its beliefs in the ability of man to achieve and know this morality without such a radical revolution of grace as was necessitated by the Fall of humankind as the Puritans understood it. Of course, if man can more or less reform himself, then the activity of God in history becomes less important, or at least less distinguishable from history itself – which brings us back towards deism. Latitudinarians would still pray, of course; nonetheless, the supernatural was to them something of a peripheral reality. Theirs was a conservative creed, a well-behaved part of the orderly Enlightenment world.

In a Latitudinarian author, then, we expect to find an emphasis on natural order and charity in society and the universe, rather than individual

salvation, or the Puritan emphasis on being 'strangers and pilgrims', traces of which are still visible in Defoe. Such a well-behaved, orderly creed fits neatly with the neo-classical influence in the work of a writer like Fielding: the basic direction of the plot of Tom Jones is, as Watt says, a 'return to the norm', which demonstrates a 'fundamentally static quality.' [97] The tendency towards an anti-supernaturalistic convention in the novel was a product of its times theologically as well as philosophically.

Again, it should be noted that, in their interest in a 'normal universe' consisting of that which was perceivable by the senses, the eighteenth-century novelists were consciously reacting against the earlier continental romance tradition of writers like de Scudery, de la Calprenede and d'Urfe; and a key aspect of this reaction was the rejection of what could be considered 'marvellous' or 'wonderful'. 'What the duce', wrote Richardson to Miss Mulso, 'do you think that I am writing a Romance? Don't you see that I am copying nature?' [102]

One wonders whether, in this exclusion of the unusual, the 'religious supernatural' tended to be parcelled up and rejected along with the purely 'fantastic' in which the romancers loved to deal: to be fair, such a combination was an amalgam that some of the saints' legends had plentifully provided. In these, thundered Holcroft late in the century,

Secure from criticism, by the tremendous alliance between their works and THE FAITH, the more improbable the story, the greater was its merit. [103]

Hence, the young novel tradition's need to mark out a territory distinct from that of the romancers may have been a further factor combining with the Enlightenment's sense of an orderly, regular universe to establish a consensus as to what was 'probable' which stayed within a closed, naturalistic system. The novel form, complained Leslie Fiedler, was 'invented precisely (as Samuel Richardson himself once boasted) to drive the "marvellous" and "wonderful" from the realm of prose fiction' [105]

When one puts together all these factors – the philosophical background of the Enlightenment;

the absence of any tradition of fiction based on supernaturalistic realism; the neo-classical aesthetic doctrine of the Stiltrennung or 'segregation of styles'; the decline of Puritanism as a living force, and its eclipse by Latitudinarianism; the reaction against the 'marvellous' in the romancers – it is not surprising that the developing novel tradition tended to become, in practice, naturalistic; based on what we might call a 'lowest-common-denominator' view of reality, stressing the world as perceived by the senses and the generally-agreed virtues. By the late eighteenth century a convention had been established, whereby the novel left God out of the world, and yet still considered the resulting picture adequate.

© 2009 Pete Lowman

References:

[105] The influence on Fielding, Smollett and Sterne of the prince of anti-romancers, Cervantes, was perhaps a further force pointing in the same direction; parodic, balancing different and opposed notions of reality, unlikely to express any view of the world more serious or radical than a general benevolence.

© 2009 Pete Lowman
