Thursday 15 May 2008 **210 ENH 302**

Discuss the importance of 'realism' in the eighteenth-century novel with reference to three of the texts you have read.

Locke's assertion in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the 'raw material of knowledge is experience' (quoted by Cash, 1955, p. 129) was a direct challenge to the hegemony of the Aristotelians and the scholastics, for whom the world could only be conceived through universals and immutable ideals. This revolutionary idea, also echoed in Descartes' famous 'I think therefore I am', placed individual perception, subjectivity, at the centre of human learning. To Locke, the mind, a 'tabula rasa', a blank slate unblemished by any original sin, was filled with ideas through the senses and reason, with language playing a fundamental part in the process (Uzgalis, 2007). The dogmatic reality of the Ancients was here replaced by the pragmatic experience of the real by the common man. As Watt underlines, this philosophical shift was mirrored in culture and literature, where from an auspicious ground a radically new form would emerge: the "novel", a literary challenge to the Classical outlook of the Augustans, focussing on specific individual lives and experiences instead of dealing with allegories and generalities. What is the relationship, then, between this new genre appearing in the eighteenth century and 'realism'? First, it is important to define these terms clearly. Then, the link will be discussed by studying three very different works, namely: *Moll Flanders*, *Tom Jones* and *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. There is a chronological sequence in this choice, but also an interesting relationship between the authors, with Fielding writing, in a sense, as a critic of Defoe, and Sterne taking aim at the formalism introduced by those pioneers. This study will analyse the technique and language in each of these books, and more specifically the way they construct reality.

According to Watt (*The Rise of the Novel*, ch.1), the concept of 'realism' in literature is not without analogies to its philosophical namesake, and there is an equivalent shift in perspective between the Ancients and the Moderns on the subject. The eighteenth century was permeated with the ideas of philosophers such as Locke, Descartes and Berkeley, and of scientists such as Newton or Leibniz, all challenging in different ways the established dogmas of their time (Beales in *The Eighteenth Century*, ch.4). From a rather static, permanent view of the universe, dominated by God and the Church, philosophy and science were creating theories of a dynamic world, controlled by forces that could be explained outside of religion. Descartes' method of using self-consciousness and reflection as a foundation of scientific knowledge was nothing but a complete reversal of the learned tradition of the Ancients.

The fundamental principle of this modern philosophical realism is the triad formed by the mind, the body and the world and their interconnections; the world and the physical body interact through the senses, whose perceptions are then passed on to the spirit. The soul feeds on this sensual experience of the world, which therefore implies that identity is not innate and immutable, but a result of our perceptions and our actions. Whereas for the Ancients life was determined almost entirely by Fate and character by birth, this new ideology stresses individual choice and free will. The Gods, or simply God, might provide an initial impetus, but human beings are the main agents of their own destiny. Moreover, there is less room for the supernatural if human nature is taken as the main focus; what seems magical can be explained as a mere illusion to the senses, a simple trick. Instead of the classical *deus ex machina*, men are now dealing with a *deus otiosus*, an idle and remote God, apprehended indirectly through the mind rather than perceived directly through the senses.

The novel, whose own name underlines its very originality, emerged as a multifarious literary genre, rather than as a consistent style; indeed as Watt (2000, ch.1) underlines, writers such as Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and Sterne could not be grouped together into the same literary school, considering the differences between their respective works. However, what they have in common is the undeniable novelty of their style when compared to their predecessors. As in philosophy the Moderns challenged the Ancients, in literature the 'novelists' created new literary forms violating or perverting the rules set by the Classicists, or more recently the Augustans. Instead of dealing with universals, stereotypes and abstractions, these authors are focussing on particular individuals, on common life, on specific and concrete personalities. Instead of the unity of time, space and action that ruled classical drama, they introduced disconnected narratives.

As Baumgarten points out, the novelists create their own miniature world with a particular care in the details, with the intention of making it believable, authentic. Some authors, such as Defoe, hide themselves by pretending to be the mere editors of their own work; others, such as Fielding, step forward and resolutely assume the mantel of proud demiurge, exhibiting their exquisite model universe – a reproduction, but allegedly a faithful one. In the case of Sterne, the goal is nothing but the creation of a 'paper man', a human mind transposed in writing. Characters are named as normal persons, and not as generic abstractions (Watt, 2000, pp.18-21); moreover, Moll Flanders, Tom Jones and Tristram Shandy all have idiosyncratic traits and well-defined attributes, thereby acquiring a depth that would have been lacking in previous literary genres. They are, in a word, plausible and this creates a link between them and us, the readers. This intimacy is reinforced if the story is told as a first-person narrative, as in *Moll Flanders* and *Tristram Shandy*. These characters *could* be real; we could be them.

Moll Flanders, chronologically the first of the works considered in this study, is a good starting point to illustrate these new techniques. Defoe was one of the first professional writers, to the Augustans an exemplary denizen of 'Grub Street' (Watt in *From Dryden to Johnson*, pp.203-216). He was writing for a wide and 'uneducated' (that is, ignorant of Greek, Latin and the Classics) audience, and not just for a few patrons. To him writing was a business, a trade like any other in an increasingly mercantile world. It is not surprising, then, that this obsession with the economy is reflected to such a high degree in his works. Additionally, Defoe was also a journalist: his *Review* was, for nine years, essentially a one-man operation (Watt, 2000, p.103). This is also apparent in this particular novel.

Essentially, *Moll Flanders* is a succession of vivid episodes, although the resulting assemblage lacks coherence. A typical episode has a format similar to an article in a newspaper: first, the scene is quickly sketched, with only a few salient details; then the action, rendered in short, precise sentences, which gives the impression of a breathless narration; finally, a retrospective analysis where the narrator indulges in self-reflection and moral considerations. For instance, when Moll steals a necklace from a child (*Moll Flanders*, pp.194-195): "going thro' *Aldersgate-street* there was a pretty little Child had been at a Dancing-School, and was going home, all alone [...]'. All the relevant details are in this opening sentence: location, age and class of the victim, weaknesses of the 'target'. Later on we find Moll running away: "[...] I went thro' into *Bartholomew Close*, and then turn'd round to another Passage that goes into *Long-lane*, so away into *Field-Lane* to *Holbournbridge* [...]". This 'staccato' passage mirrors the focussed action of the narrator, too busy following her escape route to notice (and describe) anything but the street names! Then comes the concluding self-reflection: "[...] The last Affair left no great Concern upon me, for as I did the

poor Child no harm, I only said to my self, I had given the Parents a just Reproof for their Negligence [...]".

The language used in *Moll Flanders* is simple – indeed, rather artless, as some critics would argue. Defoe was well aware of his limitations as a poet, but his goal was immediacy, not hyperbole (Watt, 2000, ch. 4). Descriptions limit themselves to the primary qualities of objects: shape, motion, number, and significantly, economic value. However, this somewhat crude and unaffected style is what gives the novel additional strength; Moll's speech would seem unreal otherwise. The themes of money and commerce are literally woven into the text, as illustrated by a detailed bill (pp.164-165), or the quotation of prices, earnings or inventories at regular points: "he put five Guineas in my hand" (p.23), "she had near 2000 l. to her Fortune" (p.68), "I had about 460 l. left, a great many very rich Cloaths, a gold Watch and some Jewels [...]" (pp.76-77).

The first-person narrative flows from beginning to end without the convenience of chapters, but this lack of structure actually reinforces the authenticity of the story, by imitating the inaccurate recollection of the older Moll. Instead of being tied to an external observer, the reader is forced to see the world through Moll's eyes, and therefore our awareness is restricted by the limits of her vision, knowledge and understanding. What might be lacking is psychological finesse; Watt goes so far as to see in Moll's behaviour a somewhat Pavlovian conditioning (2000, p.108). There is very little place for sentimentality and personal relationships in Moll's life, which accidentally reinforces our impression of her as a brutalised victim of a harsh, calculating world. As Columbus underlines, the fact that it is the older Moll recounting her life in a dispassionate and slightly ironical manner can explain this detachment and the missing elements in her tale.

Fielding, in *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, sets out to write a novel in opposition to the trend set by Defoe or Richardson. Unlike Defoe, he does not pretend to be an editor, or does not try to fool the reader into thinking that this is some autobiographical memoir: he asserts his presence and the artificiality of his work by addressing himself to the reader in a preface in each one of the eighteen books. Unlike *Moll Flanders*, this is a thoroughly planned and structured work with a finely crafted plot; definitely not a patchwork, but a methodical composition, which remains under the visible control of its creator to the very end. As Humphreys explains (*From Dryden to Johnson*, pp.313-332), Fielding is an Augustan, and perceives himself as a defender of a higher sort of literature: *Tom Jones* is, in a way, a response to *Moll Flanders* and *Pamela*, a self-conscious demonstration of how to write a novel. Kaplan sees in Fielding's prefaces a parallel plot, a series of rhetorical essays on the art of writing, and they are essential to our understanding of Fielding's technique and intentions.

The preface in Book I introduces the core subject: Human Nature, which "though here collected under one general name, is such prodigious variety [...]" (p.30). The intention is not to deal with archetypes, but to illustrate this variety by creating realistic personalities. Although Fielding uses in some cases stereotypical names such as Allworthy, Thackum or Square, these characters are depicted with enough subtlety to make them individuals rather than categories; *Tom Jones* is full of examples of this self-conscious, ironical treatment of other literary genres, and the author is quite frank in ridiculing some aspects of classical formalism. For instance, in Book IV (ch.2, pp. 134-135), he caricatures the linguistic hyperbole of romances in his presentation of Sophia Western in mock heroic style: "[...] and you the feathered choristers of nature, whose sweetest notes not even Handel can excel, tune your melodious throats to celebrate her appearance." He immediately contrasts this

introduction with a rather more mundane – but precisely worded - description: “Sophia [...] was a middle-sized woman, but rather inclining to tall.” In his preface of Book V, “Of the SERIOUS in writing”, he makes light of the classical unity of time and space, and justifies the need to be entertaining rather than purely didactic or moralistic.

What *Tom Jones* is not, as its author vigorously stresses, is one of “those idle romances which are filled with monsters, the productions, not of nature, but of distempered brains [...]” (Book IV, ch. 1). It is, as its very title suggests, a ‘history’, and this theme is recurrent in the prefaces. The preface of Book IX (pp. 422-426), “Of those who lawfully may, and of those who may not, write such histories as this”, criticises the lack of craft of writers of ‘romances and novels’. For Fielding, proper writers of such histories should exhibit the following qualities: genius, or “those powers of the mind, which are capable of penetrating into all things within our reach and knowledge, and of distinguishing their essential differences”; learning or theoretical knowledge; but also, significantly conversation, here understood as practical experience of human nature.

As the reader progresses through the book, the successive prefaces illuminate different aspects of the definition of this history. When considering realism, however, the preface of Book VIII about the ‘marvellous’ (pp. 346-352) is particularly important: the supernatural is superfluous, and “Man [...] is the highest subject [...] which presents itself to the pen of our historian, or of our poet; and, in relating his actions, great care is to be that we do not exceed the capability of the agent we describe.” The marvellous is not ruled out, but it must be probable, as Wess points out. To preserve realism, the writer “will often raise the wonder and surprise of his reader, but never that incredulous hatred mentioned by Horace”. Characters and situations might be artificial, but by being probable they become believable.

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy by contrast with the previous two texts, seems at first to be without structure, sequence or plot, nothing but a haphazard compilation of disconnected ramblings and parodies of various literary artefacts. A closer look, however, reveals a subtle scaffolding interconnecting every part. At the centre of this book is a paradox: how to represent human experience in a linear textual form, considering its intrinsically non-linear, multifaceted reality? In a psychological sense, *Tristram Shandy* is more realistic than either *Moll Flanders* or *Tom Jones*. Like the former, it uses the first-person narrative to force the reader to adopt a specific, restricted point of view; like the latter, there is a self-conscious analysis of the treatment of time and space and the complexities of human nature. What is new is the self-reflective aspect, the focus in the text on its own literary nature, on the very conventions of the genre, and the violations of these rules: missing chapters, unusual pages (the 'black page' for dead Yorick, p.29, the 'marbled page', p.181), perverted typography (for instance in Vol.III, ch.XIV: "Let us go back to the ******____ in the last chapter"), asides to the reader such as "____ How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter?" (p.47), parodies of learned texts in Latin or French... This is not so much realism as surrealism!

However, Sterne also manages to create very vivid characters by underlining their idiosyncrasies, their 'Hobby-Horses': Uncle Toby with his fortifications, Walter Shandy with his somewhat absurd theories about names or noses, and of course Tristram, whose own obsession is with the very memoir he is attempting to write. What makes them poignantly human is their very failure to control these hobby-horses. This is a reminder that human nature cannot be restricted to a mechanistic, rational, systematic abstraction: it is by essence organic, unpredictable and infinitely varied. Consider, for instance, Tristram's attempt to render elapsed time in Volume II, Chapter VIII, or Toby's paradoxical quest for the way to

show *where* he was wounded. These are not mere mechanical characters, since they are aware of the absurdity of their own respective obsessions.

Sterne was well versed in Locke's works, and especially *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which Tristram defines, interestingly, as "A history! of who? what? where? when? [...] It is a history-book, Sir, [...] of what passes in a man's own mind". Cash, while describing the Lockean psychology of *Tristram Shandy*, singles out two concepts: association of ideas through custom, but more importantly the dynamics of the train of ideas that is the base of empiricism. The first concept is well illustrated during Tristam's conception, when Mrs Shandy asks her husband "Pray, my dear, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?", conditioned as she is to associate this action with sex! The second one implies that ideas follow each other incessantly in the mind and it can be seen as the inspiration of Sterne's digressive method: "what passes in a man's own mind" is a continuous train of loosely connected thoughts. Indeed, "Digression, incontestably, are the sunshine; ____ they are the life, the soul of reading" and "the digressive and progressive movement" has been so constructed, "one wheel after another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going" (Vol. I, Ch.XXII). Later on, Walter Shandy affirms to Toby that: "in every sound man's head, there is a regular succession of ideas of one sort or another, which follow each other in train just like ____ A train of artillery? said my uncle *Toby* [...]", comically illustrating the two aforementioned principles. Considered from this angle, *Tristram Shandy* can be seen as an attempt to capture the mind at work in as realistic a manner as possible, within the limitations of the medium. It is also a powerful affirmation of the importance of experience in human nature, and the fugacity of life. The essential quality of this train of this stream of consciousness is its runaway motion, artistically transposed by Sterne in this very original novel.

With these three authors, we have seen three different manners of writing about human experience: Defoe through the vividness and immediacy of his style, making the story as believable as possible; Fielding by providing to his readers plausible characters and situations and inviting them to exercise their judgement while still appealing to their need for wonder, surprise and entertainment; Sterne, through a reproduction of the thought processes, digressions and non-sequiturs which are the essence of conscious life. All have in common the goal to paint human nature in a believable, authentic way. It is this possibility that is offered to us to identify with Moll Flander, Tom Jones and Walter Shandy, this intimacy with characters we know not to be real which characterises the novel. They could almost be real, even though at this early stage these novels are still imperfect, still experimenting different techniques. What we see there is not yet the realism of nineteenth-century writers but much more that the idealised, immutable worldview of their predecessors: perhaps we could call it ‘human naturalism’?

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