

CHAPTER VII

THE MODERN POINT OF VIEW OF FIELDING'S ACHIEVEMENT

Many modern critics attempt to present Fielding's achievement in making an essential contribution to the rise of the English novel by pointing out the outstanding devices in his novels. Most of his success can be seen in two books - Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones. Amelia is a different kind of novel which is distinctly philosophical, serious and lacks the comic and light-hearted tone of its predecessors. Jonathan Wild is not a real novel but rather a purely satiric or philosophic fable against greatness and an apology for goodness.

Fielding is a didactic writer and a moralist. Certain didactic themes repeatedly occur in his novels and plays. Fielding, as the self-conscious narrator of his novels, guides the reader through a large number of good and bad examples reflecting a positive and proper code of behaviour. The didactic aim is achieved by the artistic disparity between the right and the wrong. Henry James commented on Fielding's direct editorial commentary: Tom Jones 'has so much "life" that it amounts, for the effect of comedy and application of satire, almost to his having a mind ... his author - he handsomely possessed of a mind - such an amplitude of reflection for him and round him that we see him through the mellow air of Fielding's fine old moralism'¹

Although Fielding is an eighteenth-century writer, his ideas and attitudes are modern and universal. They can be applied to every age and every nation. His broadmindedness fits the way of thinking

of people nowadays, including his treatment of the sexes which is placed in a broad moral perspective against the strict moral principles of his age. Fielding's novels are also a mirror which reflects the age in which he lived, English society in the mid-eighteenth century. But his treatment is not only concerned with the limited British people, it is universal - the whole world is presented.

Fielding regards his novel as a work of art and the narrator's role emphasizes the artificiality of his novel. From the beginning to the end of his novel, the narrator wears a mask of irony and the reader is aware of it. Fielding is a great artist. Andrew Wright commended him upon the moral status of Tom Jones: "a highly organized, tightly woven artistic recreation of the materials of 'Nature' - all done for a festive reason."²

Many critics also admire Fielding for his eloquence. In his novels, the comic and lighthearted tone is achieved through a combination of ease and vigor of style. George Eliot, in a famous passage in Middlemarch, stated that Fielding expressed delight in "the lusty ease of his fine English."³ Andrew Lang wrote of the "delightful ease of Fielding's style."⁴ J.H. Lobban commended Fielding's "vigorous easy style."⁵ Besides the style, Fielding's language is also perfect. Most of the eighteenth-century writers, including Fielding, noticed the corruption of the language of their age: words were used in the wrong sense, and they tried to correct it. Fielding's verbal irony is evidence of his attempt to correct this imperfection.

Realism is also a noticeable characteristic of Fielding's well. Fielding's ironic technique suggests the complexity of reality, such as the contrast between appearance and reality, words and deeds. His irony is mainly didactic, rhetorical, psychological and positive, with a hidden intention to reveal the truth and to reform the imperfection in his society. Fielding's novels are realistic in the sense that the reader feels that his characters are real human beings, for example, Tom Jones, whose imprudence is characteristic of any young man who is not really mature and is capable of committing wrong despite his good-naturedness. Fielding's realism differs from Richardson's. Ian Watt admired Richardson for his realism of presentation and Fielding for his realism of assessment. Fielding's novel provides reality which is personally experienced by the reader. This means that the reader has to use his own judgement in reading Fielding's book.

The English novel is indebted to Fielding for his successful experimentation and creation of a form which tests conduct against a pre-established standard. Fielding also shows later English novelists the way to achieve verisimilitude without using sentimentalism. Ian Watt commented:

"Fielding brought to the genre something that is ultimately even more important than narrative technique - a responsible wisdom about human affairs which plays upon the deeds and the characters of his novels. His wisdom is not, perhaps, of the highest order; it is, like that of his beloved Lucian, a little inclined to be easy-going and on occasion opportunist. Nevertheless, at the end of Tom Jones we feel we have been exposed, not merely to an interesting narrative about

himself, his characters or the human lot in general. In his effort to infuse the new genre with something of the Shakespearan virtues Fielding departed too far from formal realism to initiate a viable tradition, but his work serves as a perpetual reminder that if the new genre was to challenge older literary forms it had to find a way of conveying not only a convincing impression but a wise assessment of life, an assessment that could only come from taking a much wider view than Defoe or Richardson of the affairs of mankind."⁶

