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"Downright Anarchy": Fielding's History of English Literature

Yoshihiro Shiratori

I

In the 23rd issue of *The Covent-Garden Journal* (21 March 1751), Henry Fielding (1707-54) writes a brief history of English literature.[1] This history, although one of the earliest written attempts at surveying English literary achievements chronologically, is quite a significant primary material of Fielding's, which has hitherto been ignored. No studies have ever tried to elucidate what induced Fielding late in life to survey the historical course of English literature.

The narration of the history of literature attained significance in the eighteenth century. As Trevor Ross has shown, literary history was established "as a discipline" in the late 1770s (247). The vogue for literary history culminated in the publication of Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774-81) and Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81). The rise of literary history was closely related to the formation of a literary canon. As Douglas Lane Patey puts it, "*literary canons*" were "an Augustan invention" (17; emphasis original). Warton's and Johnson's literary histories, Lawrence Lipking asserts, satisfied the need for an "ordered" canon of English literary works: "What the public demanded, and what it eventually received, was a history of English poetry, or a survey of English poets, that would provide a basis

for criticism by reviewing the entire range of art. Warton and Johnson responded to a national desire for an evaluation of what English poets had achieved" (328).

Compared to the histories written by Warton or Johnson, Fielding's history is too short and rough. For example, it does not include any particular discussions on individual works and their merit. But we should not overlook the fact that Fielding was aware of the absence of such a historical "survey" of English literature. At the start of his literary history, he declares that "none of our English Historians have spoken clearly and distinctly" about "that Body of Men to whom the Public assign the Name of AUTHORS" (149; emphasis original). In order to satisfy what Lipking calls the "national desire" for a basis for literary evaluation, Fielding sketches English literary history from the middle ages to the mid-eighteenth century. The aim of this paper is to examine what kind of literary canon Fielding anticipated and what contribution he intended to make toward it by writing his literary history. In order to do so, I will focus my study on Fielding's reference to the literature after the Restoration in 1660——the ages, as we have been told, of those two eminent authors, John Dryden and Alexander Pope.

II

In narrating his literary history, Fielding characterises the "Body" of authors as a "Literary State" (154) which has a "settled Government" (149). He imagines that the literary world in England, "the Commonwealth of Literature," forms "the Imperium in Imperio," that is, the "lesser" Empire within the "larger" Empire (149). In Fielding's view, English literature has been changed in parallel with the body politic. He thus links his literary history with political history, likening the appear-

ance of a dominant author to the enthronement of a new king.

Fielding's imagined "Commonwealth of Literature," however, did not become an "Empire" until the Restoration in 1660. In other words, Fielding does not give the status of an emperor to any authors before the Restoration. For instance, when Queen Elizabeth died and James I took the throne, Fielding writes, "the literary Government" was in the state of "Aristocracy," which was ruled by the four eminent men of letters; William Shakespeare, John Fletcher, Francis Beaumont, and Ben Jonson:

> The last of this Quadrumvirate enjoyed the Government alone during his Life; after which the Troubles that shortly after ensued, involved this lesser Commonwealth in all the Confusion and Ruin of the greater, nor can any Thing be found of it with sufficient Certainty, till the Wits in the Reign of Charles the Second, after many Struggles among themselves for Superiority, at last agreed to elect JOHN DRYDEN to be their King. (153; emphasis original)

Fielding connects the history of English literature from Shakespeare to Dryden with the political upheavals in the seventeenth century. Dryden's figure in the literary scene after the Restoration is here symbolically likened to the figure of Charles II. Both monarchs in effect played significant roles in restoring "all the Confusion and Ruin" of respective empires.

Fielding's history thus implies that the Restoration in 1660 was the major turning point in the literary history of England, whence started all the attempts at establishing the institutions of English literature as an "Empire." To setting up its "settled Government," Fielding believes, Dryden made a great contribution, and his role was taken over by Alexander Pope after Dryden's death in 1700:

> [Dryden] died . . . in a good old Age, possessed of the Kingdom of Wit, and was succeeded by King ALEXANDER, sirnamed [*sic*] POPE. (153)

Pope was the heir to Dryden's throne, and he reigned over the literary "Kingdom" in the first half of the eighteenth century. "King Alexander," Fielding goes on to tell us, "had great Merit as a Writer, and his Title to the Kingdom of Wit was better founded at least than his Enemies have pretended" (154).

In this way, Fielding's history characterises the course of English literature from 1660 to the mid-eighteenth century as the literary succession from Dryden to Pope. In the reign of these two monarchs, the "Kingdom" of English Literature enjoyed prosperity. Fielding's vision is not wrong. The Restoration was a significant point of departure for the formation of the English canon. As David Womersley tells us, in the late-seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century, there was a large group of authors who tried to "emplot the English literary past so that the advent of the refinement necessary for English literature to make good its claim to challenge comparison with any other comes hand in hand with the return of a Stuart monarch to the English throne" (Introduction xv). Dryden himself was a representative of this group; in *Of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), he writes:

> Be it spoken to the honour of the English, our Nation can never want in any Age such who are able to dispute the Empire of Wit with any people in the Universe. And though the fury of a Civil War, and Power, for twenty years together, abandon'd to a barbarous race of men, Enemies of all good Learning, had buried the Muses under the ruines of Monarchy; yet with the restoration of our happiness, we see reviv'd Poesie lifting up its head, & already shaking off the rubbish which lay so heavy on it. We

have seen since His Majesties return, many Dramatick Poems which yield not to those of any forreign [*sic*] Nation, and which deserved all Lawrels but the English. (63-64)

The congruence of the literary with the political histories is clearly suggested in this passage. With "His Majesties return," according to Dryden, the literature appropriated to "the honour of the English" made a fresh start. His preoccupation is how to identify and authorise the form of literature that deserves "all Lawrels but the English," surpassing "those of any forreign Nation" in contemporary Europe. Then Dryden had recourse to the classics. As Womersley suggests, Dryden believed that "an unrivalled familiarity with, and appropriation of, the achievements of classical literature" would secure the national pride of English literature (Introduction xvi). Pope shared this belief, when he showed his hostility to those contemporaries who neglected the status of Homer and Virgil in *An Essay on Criticism* (II. 184-203). For Dryden and Pope, an "unrivalled familiarity" with classical literature was a means of inspiring nationalism.

Their opinions were indeed influential, but theirs was not the only voice among the authors in their times. Recent studies have tended to deny the long-sustained belief that the literature from 1660s to 1740s was under the strong domination of Dryden and Pope. *Augustan Critical Writing* (1998), an anthology of the literary criticism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, is one such example. The editor Womersley attempted to rewrite the history of the so-called "Augustan literature" by collecting the hitherto "neglected" essays written by those who raised objections to the neo-classicism of Dryden and Pope (Introduction xv). For example, William Coward's *Licentia Poetica* (1709) revealed his impatience with Pope's veneration of classical literature:

> I think not Modern English Poetry without Blemish . . . but my endeavour is to justifie our own Nation from the aspersion and calumny of some Bigots to *Ancient Poetry*, who are of Opinion, that nothing can be done well, but what must have *Their* Stamp, and *Authority* to support it, else they condemn it. (qtd. in Womersley xxxv; emphasis original)

Coward is full of confidence. Without the "*Authority*" of "Ancient Poetry," and without the "Bigots" to the classics, he is positive that the literature of "our own Nation" is vindicable. As Womersley tells us, in the first half of the eighteenth century, critics like Coward came to confirm the conviction of a general readership that literary evaluation was possible without the critical "rules" proffered by Dryden and Pope, whose view of poetry was "then in danger of being overwhelmed by more recent" attitudes toward the greatness of national literature (xxxv-xxxviii). Through those polemics on the identity of English literature, Howard D. Weinbrot assures us, "the British canon that equals the classics . . . replaces the classics" (127).

On the surface, Fielding's literary history seems to oppose such a parochial nationalist policy toward English literature. Fielding writes that the literary world after the death of Pope in 1745 was falling into the "most deplorable State" (149):

> After the Demise of King Alexander, the Literary State relapsed again into a Democracy, or rather indeed into downright Anarchy. . . . (154)

At first sight, the implication seems clear. Although Pope had played an important part in making up the loss of Dryden in 1700, no author has ever taken over the business from "King Alexander." As a result, English literature in the mid-eighteenth century is now thrown into "downright Anarchy" with "no Subordination, no lawful Power, and no

settled Government" (149).

The word "Anarchy" Fielding uses here appears to be apocalyptic. It makes us imagine Fielding lamenting, on the one hand, the Fall of the Dryden-Pope Empire and cursing, on the other hand, the easy self-confidences of those longing for the liberty and independence of modern English poetics. But is it possible to conclude that Fielding was one of those reactionaries who hoped for a U-turn back to the ages of Dryden and Pope? The answer is, let me emphasise, No.

Many scholars have believed that Fielding's view on literature was thoroughly conservative.[2] The "distinguishing elements" of his works, Ian Watt asserts, "have their roots not so much in social change as in the neo-classical literary tradition" (239). Fielding's literary history will show that Watt's claim is not right. Fielding wrote the history of English literature not because he wanted to pay homage to Dryden and Pope, but because he hoped to decide the new course of English literature that would break with the triumph of "the neo-classical literary tradition."

III

In Fielding's history, as I have explained earlier, the progress of the literary world is described in parallel with that of the body politic, and Dryden's appearance on the literary stage is obviously likened to Charles II's succession to the throne. Curiously, however, Pope seems to have no explicit counterpart as a real king. Fielding's text pretends to dissociate literary history from political history after the death of Dryden. But it is worth noting that Fielding implicitly compares Pope's "Empire" to the reign of James II:

> This Prince [Pope] enjoyed the Crown many Years, and is thought to have stretched the Prerogative much farther than his

> Predecessor: He is said to have been extremely jealous of the Affections of his Subjects, and to have employed various Spies, by whom if he was informed of the least Suggestion against his Title, he never failed of branding the accused Person with the Word DUNCE on his Forehead in broad Letters; after which the unhappy Culprit was obliged to lay by his Pen forever; for no Bookseller would venture to print a Word that he wrote. (153; emphasis original)

Pope and James II, in Fielding's view, had much in common with each other. Both of the "Prince[s]" attempted to stretch "the Prerogative," oppressed the liberty of their "Subjects," and believed in Catholicism. Fielding's metaphor thus identifies the literary "Empire" of Dryden and Pope with the Stuart dynasty in the age of Charles II and James II. This metaphor has great significance, because Fielding was a supporter of the Hanoverian dynasty and had hostility toward the Jacobites.

When Queen Anne died in 1714, George I of the House of Hanover was invited to be the new king of England, according to the Act of Settlement promulgated in 1701. But the force of the Jacobites was still firm and, in 1715 and 1745, they rose in revolt against the Hanoverian monarchy. In the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, the "Young Pretender" Prince Charles Edward Stuart, the grandson of dethroned James II, and his army attempted to retake the throne of England for his father James Francis Edward Stuart, "the Old Pretender," who was then in exile in France. As is well known, Fielding was one of the most ardent propagandists for the anti-Jacobite campaign in the mid-1740s. He wrote several pamphlets opposing the Rebellion and edited two periodicals: *The True Patriot* (5 November 1745 to 17 June 1746) *and The Jacobite's Journal* (5 December 1747 to 5 November 1748), in which he defends the Hanoverian government against the Jacobites.[3]

The fact that Fielding was an ardent advocate of the Hanoverian regime holds the key to a reading of his literary history. The implicit association between Alexander Pope and James II hints at Fielding's resolution to break with the achievements of the Augustan literary world dominated by Pope and his "principal Courtiers and Favourites" (154). To extend Fielding's metaphor that associates Pope with James II, "the Demise of King Alexander" would mean the Fall of the neo-classicism. By comparing the Augustan age to the Stuart dynasty, Fielding suggests that mid-century literature should enter into a new phase that guarantees no return to the past. Thus it is obvious that the Hanoverian Fielding firmly believed that, just as the body politic of England had started afresh since the demise of the Stuarts, Pope's death should be remembered as a glorious page in the history of English literature.

In this sense, Fielding's literary history reflects the author's haunting preoccupation with a genealogical canon that could legitimise the genre he has founded: the "comic Epic-Poem in Prose" (*Joseph Andrews* 4). The term "Epic" used here does not imply the retrogression to the classics. Fielding hoped to create an entirely original and new "kind of Writing" which had never been attempted in the English language (*Joseph Andrews* 3). As Mikhail Bakhtin has put it in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the epic is a genre that describes "national beginnings" and, consequently, such words as "beginning," "first," and "founder" have significant meanings for "the epic world view"(13). Echoing Bakhtin's theory on the epic, Timothy Brennan points out that the novel imitates the epic's "nation-forming role" (50). In Fielding's "Epic -Poem in Prose," the author plays a vital role as a "Founder" in legitimating the "national beginning" of Hanoverian England. In the late 1740s and early 50s, Fielding was ambitious to authorise both the

literary genre which he himself originated with himself and the reign of the constitutional monarch of the time. A passage from *Tom Jones* reveals this ambition clearly:

> [A]s I am, in reality, the Founder of a new Providence of Writing, so I am at liberty to make what Laws I please therein. And these Laws, my Readers, whom I consider as my Subjects, are bound to believe in and to obey; with which that they may readily and cheerfully comply, I do hereby assure them, that I shall principally regard their Ease and Advantage in all such Institutions: For I do not, like a *jure divino* Tyrant, imagine that they are my Slaves, or my Commodity. I am, indeed, set over them for their own Good only, and was created for their Use, and not they for mine. Nor do I doubt, while I make their Interest the great Rule of my Writings, they will unanimously concur in supporting my Dignity, and in rendering me all the Honour I shall deserve or desire. (59; emphasis original)

Political implications are as obvious in this passage as in his literary history. In the world of Fielding's "Epic-Poem in Prose," it is possible for the "Founder" to imagine himself to be a monarch and his readers as his "Subjects." This monarch, however, should not behave as if he were a "Tyrant." Why cannot "the Founder of a new Providence of Writing" profess himself to be "a *jure divino* Tyrant"? The reason will be clarified by comparing the passage quoted above with one from *A Serious Address to the People of Great Britain*, a political pamphlet written on the Jacobite Rebellion in 1745, where Fielding severely criticises the reign of James II:

> It was not only the Difference of his Religion from that of this Country, which made him unfit to be King of it; he was unfit to govern even a Catholic Country, which had Liberties to defend,

because his Mind was strongly tainted with all the Notions of Absolute Power. Passive Obedience, and Non-resistance on the Part of the Subject, and a dispensing Power in the Crown, with an indefeasible Hereditary Right, *Jure Divino*, were as much Articles of his political Creed, as the Supremacy of the Pope, or Transubstantiation, were of his religious one. . . . (5; emphasis original)

As a Hanoverian, Fielding was disgusted by the "*Jure Divino*" king whose "political Creed" was obsessive about "the Notions of Absolute Power." He had to try all possible means to argue against such absolutism and to defend the consummate image of kingship embodied in the governance of George II. In Fielding's opinion, the monarch is wise when he rejects his "Absolute Power," demands no "Passive Obedience, and Non-resistance" of the public and, to echo the narrator of *Tom Jones*, devotes his power of governing "Institutions" entirely to the "Ease and Advantage," or "Good" and "Interest" of his "Subjects." If he did so, then his "Dignity" would be "unanimously" supported by his public.

In the 27th issue of *The True Patriot* (29 April 1747), Fielding writes that "Benevolence in Authority" is to be praised as an "excellent Temper in our Sovereign" George II: "those who have had the Honour to live within the nearest Sight of their Sovereign" must conclude that "no Monarch, nay, no Man hath ever been more inflexibly just, and that as well in the Distribution of Rewards as Punishments" (278-79). Clearly, it is this ideal image of perfect sovereignty, "Benevolence in Authority," that Hanoverian Fielding attempts to imitate and validate in *Tom Jones*, in which the author, as in his literary history, shows his good command of the metaphor for inheritance and succession. The descriptions of the hero's stepfather, Mr. Allworthy, are replete with

reminders of Fielding's eulogy to George II. Allworthy, the present master of "*Paradise Hall*" (74; emphasis original), is a man whom "Nature" has endowed with both "a Benevolent Heart" and "one of the largest Estates in the Country" (27). As a magistrate, he has jurisdiction over the parish. This magistrate never attempts to abuse his "Power" and tends, on the contrary, to exert his "Benevolence" too indulgently (44). "It was Mr. *Allworthy's* Custom never to punish any one, not even to turn away a Servant, in a Passion" (236; emphasis original). But once someone disturbs the peace of the parish, the magistrate Allworthy becomes a strict judge: "tho' Mr. *Allworthy* did not think . . . that Mercy consists only in punishing Offenders; yet he was as far from thinking that it is proper to this excellent Quality to pardon great Criminals wantonly, without any Reason whatever" (77).

Allworthy's "Benevolence in Authority" brings peace to the parish he governs. Then the main plot of the novel revolves around the problem that is crucial for the whole parish: who is the fittest successor to Allworthy's "government"? As it turns out, the author's choice is the hero Tom Jones, who is, significantly, "a hearty Well-wisher to the glorious Cause of Liberty, and of Protestant Religion" (280). On his way to London, Tom happens to meet a company of soldiers marching against the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. Tom decides to fight against the Jacobites, serving the company as "a Volunteer in this Expedition" (280). "The Cause of King *George* is the Cause of Liberty and True Religion," Tom declares, "my chief End and Desire is a glorious Death in the Service of my King and Country" (334; emphasis original).

But Tom soon gives up joining the company and, instead, devotes himself to chasing the heroine Sophia Western. Is Tom's patriotic spirit so weak as to put the devotion to Sophia before "the Cause of Liberty and True Religion"? No. Ironically, Tom's chase after Sophia is a good

way to render "the Service of my King and Country." The novel ends with Tom being appointed the heir to Allworthy's fortune and married to Sophia, whose father is a "famous *Jacobite*" (441; emphasis original). Tom inherits the estates not only of Allworthy but also of Squire Western, who openly declares, "I am a true *Englishman*, and not of . . . *Hanover* Breed, that have eat up the Nation" (255; emphasis original). In sum, this marriage enables the Hanoverian landowner Tom Jones to annex the estate of the Stuart royalist Western to his estate and thereby strengthen the authority and power of "*Paradise Hall*" to serve "[t]he Cause of King *George*."

The happy ending of *Tom Jones* thus assures the happy beginnings of both the parish governed by the Hanoverian hero and England in the reign of George II. The novel closes with this highly blissful sentence: "there is not a Neighbour, a Tenant or a Servant who doth not most gratefully bless the Day when Mr. *Jones* was married to his *Sophia*" (761; emphasis original). Tom's marriage to Sophia, the annexation of the Jacobite's land by the Hanoverian landlord, will go down in history. This happy conclusion makes a sharp contrast with the ending of Fielding's literary history. In both works, the author uses the plot of monarchical succession as a metaphor for narrating the histories of both communities——Allworthy's parish and the "Commonwealth of Literature." However, whereas *Tom Jones* succeeds in suggesting the happy beginning of "*Paradise Hall*," Fielding's history of English literature adumbrates a pessimistic prospect for the future of English literature: "Anarchy." What is it that made him believe the literary world in 1752 to be in a condition of "Anarchy"? Why did Fielding fail to conclude his literary history as blissfully as *Tom Jones*?

By comparing Alexander Pope to James II, Fielding suggests that contemporary authors in Hanoverian England should devote their

energies to making new literary forms and styles appropriate to the Hanoverian ideology. As is evident from *Tom Jones*, his "new Providence of Writing" was his solution: the "Epic-Poem in Prose" that not only represents but also legitimises the "national beginning" of Hanoverian England. Indeed, Fielding was proud of his status as the "Founder" of a new genre: the narrator of *Tom Jones* openly wonders "if anyone shall do me the Honour of imitating my Manner" (641). Would his "Epic" be placed at the centre of the English canon? Who would follow "my Manner"? Fielding's concern over the status of his own authorship made him realise that he was in the midst of "Anarchy."

Throughout his lifetime, Fielding was annoyed by various unjust accusations.[4] In the 4th issue of *The Covent-Garden Journal* (14 January 1752), he defines self-mockingly the word "author" as "A laughing stock. It means likewise a poor Fellow, and in general an Object of Contempt" (35). It was not until the early nineteenth century that Fielding's achievement as the "Founder" was justly appreciated. On 6 April 1772, James Boswell tells us, Samuel Johnson still insisted that Fielding was "a blockhead" (159). In 1820, Walter Scott confers on Fielding the title "Father of the English Novel" (70). What happened during these five decades was the establishment of what Homer Obed Brown calls "the institution of the English novel" (171). "Insistence that the novel fully realised its generic identity——that it was 'institutionalised'——by 1750," Brown asserts, "is based on a misconception of institution" (xi):

> what we now call "the novel" didn't appear visibly as a recognised single "genre" until the early nineteenth century, when the essentially heterogeneous fictional prose narratives of the preceding century were grouped together institutionally

under that name. (xviii)

Brown gives us a crucial hint on the reason why Fielding concludes his literary history with the unhappy word "Anarchy." Fielding never believed that he and his contemporary authors of prose fiction were collaborating toward the rise and development of the same literary genre. It is this lack of collaboration, lack of homogeneous institution that Fielding describes as "downright Anarchy." When he surveyed the history of English literature in 1752, Fielding desperately wanted in vain the canon that would authorise his "Epic-Poem in Prose." "Anarchy" is the logical conclusion of Fielding's history that frustratingly anticipates the future course of English literature.

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Notes

(1) *The Covent-Garden Journal* is Fielding's last effort at journalism. 72 numbers were published from 4 January to 25 November 1752. Fielding writes an opening essay on the first page of each issue.

(2) For detailed arguments about Fielding's commitment to the classics, see Nancy A Mace, *Henry Fielding's Novels and the Classical Tradition* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1996).

(3) Useful information on Fielding's involvement with politics is given by Brian McCrea, *Henry Fielding and the Politics of Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1981); Thomas R. Cleary, *Henry Fielding: Political Writer* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1984).

(4) For a full account of the critical reception of Fielding's works, see Homes F. Dudden, *Henry Fielding: His Life, Works, and Times* (London: Oxford UP, 1952).

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