Kerstin Frank

Of Genii, Giants and Ghosts

Fantastic Elements and Subjectivity in Eighteenth-Century British Narratives

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1. INTRODUCTION: FANTASTIC ELEMENTS IN NARRATIVES OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

In Henry Fielding's *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743), the megalomaniac hero finds himself facing death alone on the open sea, as so many protagonists before and after him. Abandoned in a damaged boat without oars or sails and with a limited supply of food, he resolves not to be afraid of death or anything else, eats his provisions and jumps overboard, but escapes his impending death:

> Our hero, having with wonderful resolution thrown himself into the sea, [...] was miraculously within two minutes after replaced in his boat; and this without the assistance of a dolphin or a seahorse, or any other fish or animal, who are always as ready at hand when a poet or historian pleases to call for them to carry a hero through the sea [...]. The truth is, we do not choose to have any recourse to miracles, from the strict observance we pay to that rule of Horace: *Nec Deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus*. The meaning of which is, do not bring in a supernatural agent when you can do without him; and indeed we are much deeper read in natural than supernatural causes. (Fielding [1743] 1958, 79)

The narrator accordingly presents a 'natural' explanation for his hero's rescue: since Nature has allocated a purpose to every person, she will not allow anything to stand in its way, and having great plans for Jonathan Wild, she

> no sooner spied him in the water than she softly whispered in his ear to attempt the recovery of his boat, which call he immediately obeyed, and, being a good swimmer, and it being a perfect calm, with great facility accomplished it.
>
> Thus we think this passage in our history, at first so greatly surprising, is very naturally accounted for, and our relations rescued from the Prodigious, which, though it often occurs in biography, is not to be encouraged nor much commended on any occasion, unless when absolutely necessary to prevent the history's being at an end. Secondly, we hope our hero is justified from that imputation of want of resolution which must have been fatal to the greatness of his character. (Fielding [1743] 1958, 80-81)

This passage addresses and satirises two of the central challenges for narrative fiction in the eighteenth century: the increasingly pervasive ideal of a 'realistic' or 'natural' fictional world and plot, and the problem of describing fictional characters in a way that evokes conditions of human subjectivity. The idea and practice of literary realism is mocked here in an ironic twist as the narrator renounces the use of supernatural agents only to introduce Nature as a scheming and meddling force who determines the fate of people and rescues the hero. By calling this force 'Nature' and the rescue of Jonathan Wild "naturally accounted for", the text playfully exposes novelistic claims to realism as merely rhetorical, a matter of re-branding and 'naturalising' the coincidences and strange events that continue to shape narrative fiction and that can prove to be "absolutely necessary" to get the hero out of a scrape and enable the narrative to go on. Fiction, it is thus implied, is never completely 'natural' or realistic, and the novel's

aspiration to naturalness can only be a pretence or a project that is destined to fail.[1] In *Jonathan Wild*, the overt, commenting heterodiegetic narrator himself constitutes an unnatural fictional element, since real life does not contain such a powerful, meaning-making agency.[2]

The second challenge to eighteenth-century fiction which this passage satirises is the problem of creating characters whose traits, actions, and social embeddedness relate to contemporary questions of human subjectivity. A particularly puzzling aspect of the wide field of subjectivity is that of the extent and limits of human autonomy and agency, i.e. how far the subject can determine his or her own fate in the face of social and, possibly, metaphysical forces. In this passage, Jonathan Wild asserts his own power by throwing himself into the sea, actively confronting the death that seems inevitable. His agency seems much diminished in the following passages about Nature's plans for him and her (super)Natural help. However, in the end, she rescues Jonathan simply by telling him to rescue himself, which he achieves through his own skills as a swimmer and the fortuitous calmness of the sea. Thus, in a second ironic twist, after lengthy deliberations on supernatural plot savers and the all-determining control of Nature, it is individual aptness and chance that save the protagonist. The (super)Natural influence is reduced to a psychological factor or the basic survival instinct, a motivation that is indeed most natural and usually needs no outside prompting.[3] After Jonathan Wild has thus saved himself from the self-induced immediate danger of drowning, he is rescued the next day by the timely appearance of a ship that takes him on board. This second, more wonderful deliverance is narrated without any further metafictional comments on coincidences and 'natural' causes in fiction. The text oscillates between granting its 'hero' the power to actively determine his own fate and diminishing this power by introducing notions of pre-destination and a supreme (super)Natural power. It thus implies contemporary debates about fictional conventions and narrative 'realism' and, on a different scale, debates about the position of the human subject in relation to metaphysical power. The (rhetorical) elimination, reintroduction, and subsequent reduction of the supernatural challenge the boundaries between 'realism' and the 'supernatural' as well as those between the subject's autonomy and heteronomy.

These questions of realism and the subject are precisely the aspects that literary history commonly associates with the emerging eighteenth-century novel. As Barbara Benedict puts it: "Scholars have long claimed that the eighteenth century banished the mysteriousness of the world and the magical animation of nature in a cold shower of

1 This is a central argument of Schläger, who claims that the novel's impossible aspirations of presenting experiential reality are an important force in the genre's development and diversification during the eighteenth century (cf. 1993, 324).

2 'Unnatural' is here used in the sense of Alber, who names "the omnimentality of the omniscient narrator in much realist fiction" as one type of an unnatural, i.e. impossible, element in fiction (2016, 43).

3 Both Molesworth and Capoferro also discuss this episode, but do not mention this second ironic twist (cf. Molesworth, 2010, 158; Capoferro 2010, 80f.).