"Unbending the mind": introduction by way of diversion

> I div'd not into the political Principles of any State, but knew to a Tittle, what City had the most elegant Buildings, the best judg'd Amusements, or the finest Women. I troubled not my Head about the endless Controversies in Religion, nor enquir'd where I came, which flourish'd, which was tolerated, or which oppress'd: But I narrowly inspected the Architecture and Ornaments of their Churches; observ'd how the Rules of the Antients and Moderns agreed, and compar'd the Beauties and Proportions of the several Orders. I never sought the Conversation of their Divines, Philosophers, or Astrologers; but became intimate with every Poet, Critick, Painter and Statuary, each different Country call'd eminent. In short, I principally study'd the Fundamentals of the publick Amusements most follow'd, wherever I came; I judiciously weigh'd the minutest Particulars in all Entertainments exhibited in OPERA or PLAY-HOUSES; both on this, and t'other Side the Alps. I read attentively all the French and Italian Criticks: I could repeat the greatest Part of three hundred and thirteen German Commentators; and went to the Bottom of all the Low-Dutch Authors who commented upon them. Then considering that Speculation is but barely a Foundation in every thing, which Practice can only compleat, I sung the chief Part of an OPERA, at Paris, a whole Winter, and with equal Applause appear'd as the Hero of a Tragedy at Amsterdam. Thus loaded with critical Learning, and cloath'd with necessary Experience, I return'd to my native Country, and have, since that Time, liv'd in publick, yet unknown, making my Studies my Amusements, always pleasing and improving my Mind by the noted Entertainments of the Town.
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> – Ralph, *The Touch-Stone: or, Historical, Critical, Political, Philosophical, and Theological Essays on the Reigning Diversions of the Town* (1728)

Like *The Touch-Stone*, this book is a study of amusement which makes an amusement out of study. Endeavouring to delight and instruct as well as to "unbend" the mind, it describes the anxious fascination of eighteenth-century writers with the "Reigning Diversions of the Town," while

attempting to account for the enormous pleasure eighteenth-century readers seem to have taken in the characteristically digressive representation of these diversions. The book surveys conceptions of diversion during a particularly dynamic period of English cultural history, in which leisure was being produced in entirely new ways and consumed on an increasingly commercial basis. Commercialized leisure was one of the "incontestable signs" of growing affluence that historians since J.H. Plumb have identified with the birth of a consumer society in England. According to Plumb, commercialization "can be discerned in the 1690s, and in 1750 and 1760 leisure was becoming an industry with great potentiality for growth."[1] Following Plumb, I analyse the years between approximately 1690 and 1760, not simply because I too am interested in the discovery that "*leisure could be turned to profit*," but because this formative period in the "commercialization of leisure" coincided with a range of related shifts which, as a number of more recent scholars have observed, brought about significant changes in the relationship between English literature and culture – changes exemplified by my epigraph's pairing of "Authors" and "Criticks" with "the Fundamentals of the publick Amusements."

For Lawrence Klein, the period witnesses the advent of a "bourgeois public sphere," created by print, cultivated in coffeehouses, and constituted by "polite" and inclusive discussion of aesthetics, policy, natural philosophy, and social life. For Harold Love, the period is marked by an antagonism between "polite" and "popular," which materializes in response to the transition from an aristocratic scribal culture to a more democratic print culture. For Brean Hammond, the expansion of print during this period facilitates, and is facilitated by, the growth of a professional class of writers who unabashedly seek to supply the demands of a market of readers. And this market, as J. Paul Hunter argues, necessarily altered the modes of literary production by rejecting conventional genres and styles in favour of "news and new things" – the recognized speciality of Grub Street. According to Erin Mackie, the period sees the emergence of a new mode of being as well, a nascent sense of self that was ironically realized through social consumption – staring in shop-windows, wearing hoop-petticoats, perusing fashionable literature, and paying for pleasure – in a maturing market economy. William B. Warner associates this commercial demand for pleasure with the "elevation" of novel reading from 1684 to 1750, in that the eponymously "new" genre seemed shamelessly to appeal to public taste and threatened, in turn, to recast all poems, plays, periodicals, and prose works as a "mode of entertainment." In the opinion of John O'Brien, the modern conception of entertainment itself, as a "form

of diversion directed to a mass culture," develops in the closing years of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century. And, finally, for Patricia Meyer Spacks, the roughly seventy-year period culminates with the invention of "boredom" as a psychological category denoting a failure to entertain or engage the attention, and thereby claiming "interest" as the sine qua non of all pleasurable discourse.[2] The commercialization of leisure therefore coincides with the cultural moment at which writing began self-consciously to resist boredom and reading began to expect it to do so. While showmen and impresarios actively catered to the eclectic and often eccentric desires of England's pleasure seekers, professional authors "to be lett" looked for innovative ways to gratify a reading audience increasingly avid for diversion.

Taken together, these shifts comprise what has been seen as a "cultural revolution" in England between the lapse of the Licensing Act (1695) and the case of *Donaldson vs. Beckett* (1774); between the opening of Don Saltero's coffeehouse of curiosities (1695) and the foundation of the British Museum (1753); between Collier's attack on theatrical entertainment (1698) and Zoffany's commemorative portrait of *David Garrick as Sir John Brute* (1765); and between the "Glorious Revolution" (1688) and the accession of the George III (1760), whose wide reading and interest in theatre and sport made him peculiarly appreciative of the pleasures of the imagination.[3] What has less often been noticed is that this broad revolution in culture also coincided with something of a "discursive revolution" in English literature, since this was also the historical context in which popular writing came to be distinguished by its propensity for disruption and by a fashion for what Wayne Booth identified in the 1950s as "intrusive play" and "self-conscious narration."[4] The period between the experiments of John Dunton (1690s) and the extravagancies of Laurence Sterne (1760s) is characterized by an increasing awareness of the rhetorical possibilities of devices usually perceived to go beyond mimetic decorum and to flout the prevailing standards of English neoclassicism, devices associated with false, abusive, or catachrestic wit, textual and typographical play, and, most pervasively, digression. This "genealogy" was in fact recognized during the period itself. In the wake of *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), where Sterne famously described digression as the "the life, the soul of reading," an enterprising publisher "revised," "corrected," and reprinted Volume I of Dunton's self-reflexively rambling prose narrative, *A Voyage Round the World* (1691), as *The Life, Travels, and Adventures of Christopher Wagstaff, Gentleman, Grandfather to Tristram Shandy* (1762).[5] Claiming plausibly that Sterne is "under *some obligations*" to the author of the earlier work, the

editor of the reprint identifies several similarities in "the general turn of the stile" and in "the method of *protraction*, or art of *continuation*, where by either performance might be *lengthened out* to the utmost extent of the reader's *patience*, or author's *imagination*." Yet because each "motley production" engages primarily "by its singularity," the editor ultimately argues that both works are "chiefly calculated" for "the amusement and entertainment of such as are willing to be pleased they care not how, or why."[6] *The Rhetoric of Diversion* seeks to account for why authors "calculated" their writing for "amusement and entertainment," and how the "motley productions" they published "pleased" readers. The book opens by asking why the period during which the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake was gradually legitimized happens also to be the period during which intrusion, obstruction, and interruption first began to thrive as conspicuous aesthetic techniques. It answers this question through a series of close readings that reveal the complex reciprocity between commercialized leisure and commercial literature in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English culture.

In discussing what I view as the coming of age of devices like digression, I do not of course mean to suggest that digressive wit was invented, much less perfected, in the seventy or so years between Dunton and Sterne. Indeed, following in the oratorical tradition of Cicero and Quintilian, early modern rhetoricians like George Puttenham had sanctioned tropes and figures of "tollerable disorder" as a convenient way of giving pleasing variety to a work and of surprising through the "noueltie" of expressions distinct from the "ordinary and accustomed." Versatile devices such as the *hyperbaton* and the *parenthesis* were a constitutive part of what was then conceived of as "ornament poeticall," in that they adorned a work while providing "fresh objects of interest" to divert the active mind.[7] Critics have long been interested in understanding the meaning of the "Taffeta phrases" and "Figures pedantical" that feature in Shakespeare's comedies, the bookish copia that structures Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621–38), and the "digressive voices" foregrounded in Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* (c. 1651), Browne's *Garden of Cyrus* (1658), and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667–74).[8] More to the point, they have demonstrated the deep influence on eighteenth-century English writers of Thomas Shelton's early edition of Cervantes (1612–20), Charles Cotton's popular translation of Montaigne (1685), and Urquhart and Motteux's textually exuberant edition of Rabelais (1708), each of which provided an important pattern for digressive writing.[9] But under a new literary-critical regime, influenced by the linguistic proscriptions of the Royal Society and distinguished by a shift in taste from rhetorical display to formal unity and

harmony, the tolerability of "disorder" came to be a subject of discourse in its own right.[10] What changes, therefore, is the degree of "self-consciousness" with which these kinds of devices are treated, both by writers who brazenly defend their refusal to be restrained and by readers who comment upon their experience of "over-strained" metaphors, "*typographical* figures," "digressions upon digression," or, as Dunton's eighteenth-century editor puts it on his title page, "OUT-OF-THE-WAY" writing.

Reading and diversionary rhetoric, 1690–1760

Ever since the publication of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Booth's seminal study of literary self-consciousness, scholars have taken for granted that although such devices may seem "disruptive and inartistic," they are paradoxically but precisely what gives many of the works published during this period their "formal coherence."[11] Discussion of disruption has thus routinely focused on the methods through which a real or fictional "author" makes known his meaning and draws attention to the "written-ness" or "printed-ness" or "crafted-ness" of his own work. Expanding upon Booth's emphasis on the "notion of function," scholars have stressed the purported epistemological motives for linguistic and textual disruption, and have argued for the critical importance of laying bare the artificiality of literature and, by extension, of social and political institutions – of "consciousness-raising." The result has been a tendency to place literary self-consciousness, as Christina Lupton has wryly warned, "on the side of the critic who exposed the true operation of discourse, typically in spite of an author's attempt to use words as transparently as possible."[12] So, for instance, Garry Sherbert contends that the figurative excess that usually distinguishes the learned "Anatomy" or Menippean satire foregrounds the arbitrariness of language and "symbolizes, ironically, the difficulty of communication." Christopher Flint identifies the rows of asterisks that frequently punctuate eighteenth-century works as a passionate resistance to the "alienation" and "anonymity" imposed by the "mechanics of the print industry." And J. Paul Hunter explains the obtrusiveness of many of the period's narrators as an attempt to control "the process of creation" and "the nature of response."[13] Drawing compelling evidence from the reflexive asides of authors who apologize for their disruptive rhetoric, such arguments point to important critical cruces. Yet in giving priority to the reasons why a writer might *employ* the devices of digressive wit, scholars have neglected to ask how a reader might *enjoy* them. Just as significantly, they have failed to recognize a feature of these devices that might help to

answer this question as well as account for their ascendance at this particular time and place: the fact that self-conscious authors regularly describe their intrusions, obstructions, and interruptions through the language of contemporary diversion.

While rambling, for example, through the streets of turn-of-the-century London, Tom Brown excuses the digressions in his *Amusements Serious and Comical* (1700) on the grounds that they "properly belong to my Subject, since they are all *nothing but Amusements*." John Dunton compares the narrative enigmas of his *Voyage Round the World* (1691) to playing "at *Bob-cherry*" and his mischievous conceits to the antics of a "*Merry Andrew*, clapping his Conjuring-Cap on." The Grub Street speaker of Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (1704–10) identifies the paratextual conventions of "*Prefaces, Epistles, Advertisements, Introductions, Prolegomena*'s, *Apparatus*'s, [and] *To-the-Reader*'s" with the commercial tactics of "*Monster-mongers* and other *Retailers of strange Sights*." Richard Blackmore justifies the extended similes in his epic poetry by asserting that the "Exercise of Wit" excels "all other Recreations," including "Country Sports" and the "politer Diversions of Balls and Operas." A "good sizable *Hiatus*" in the text of Thomas D'Urfey's *An Essay Towards the Theory of the Intelligible World* (1708) is made an occasion for wonder and delight by being associated with the "private Aperture" in a Savoyard's raree-show. In the preface to his scandal narrative, *All for the Better; or, The World Turn'd Up-Side Down* (1720), Charles Gildon disclaims that he has interspersed his "Argumentations with several Fables or Novels, which, like the Musick between the *Acts* of a *Play*, serve to relieve the Mind from less agreeable Pursuits." Alexander Pope has Martinus Scriblerus draw an analogy between the popular appeal of bathetic tropes and figures and the ballyhoo of a "Master of a Show in Smithfield." Colley Cibber likens a "Rhapsody" that distracts him from the "Historical View of the Stage" in his autobiographical *Apology* (1740) to a "Dance between the Acts," which makes up "for the Dullness of what would have been by itself only proper." Henry Fielding has the impertinent narrator of *Tom Jones* (1749) refer to his rhetorically inflated and mock-heroic passages as a "mental Entertainment." And in *The Touch-Stone: or, Historical, Critical, Political, Philosophical, and Theological Essays on the Reigning Diversions of the Town* (1728), James Ralph, popular journalist, pamphleteer, and eventual assistant manager of the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, digresses from his survey of what he calls the "most taking" of London amusements in order to comment self-consciously on what he acknowledges to be his oddly singular style: "as no Author can pretend, in Writing, to please the

various Humours and Desires of Mankind; let him but leave some Parts of his Work imperfect, and every Man, in finding out the Meaning, will undoubtedly strive to please himself."[14]

In manner, if not necessarily in matter, Ralph's digression exemplifies the subject of his series of essays, even as it seems to stray from the "Reigning Diversions." For digression, as *The Touch-Stone* appears to suggest, has a similar effect on readers as diversion was believed to have on eighteenth-century pleasure seekers. As a noun "diversion" refers to any pastime, sport, or recreation that is engaged for the purposes of "entertainment" (*O.E.D.* 4.b). But as a derivative of the verb "divert," the term also denotes a "turning aside" from "a settled or particular course of action," from "the business in hand," or from "one's regular occupation" (*O.E.D.* 2).[15] The fact that *The Touch-Stone* turns aside from its apology for the "noted Entertainments" in order to defend the pleasures of "imperfect" writing points to a semantic overlap between what I classify as "cultural diversion" and "discursive diversion" – between social amusements which provide relief from the serious concerns of daily life and rhetorical devices which characteristically disrupt so much of the discourse of the period. Writers of the period not only recognized this overlap, but exploited it in order to satisfy the new cultural demand for diversion by way of the formal idiosyncrasies of their work: through, for example, luxuriant, illogical, and mixed metaphors, typographical blanks and lacunae, interpolated tales, burlesque erudition, and the devices of digressive wit. Such devices enact at the linguistic and textual level the nature and purpose of eighteenth-century diversion: they "unbend the mind," to use Samuel Johnson's definition, "by turning it off from care," and thereby achieve an ironic verisimilitude through a kind of formal parody of the "Reigning Diversions of the Town."[16] As Paul Keen has recently demonstrated, eighteenth-century debates over literature were "necessarily embedded" within the proliferation of commercial spectacles and entertainments.[17] The harlequinades mounted by John Rich and John Thurmond, the human and animal oddities exhibited at Bartholomew Fair, and, in general, the busy round of amusements offered around every corner and in every street and "*over-against*" every London establishment provided a useful context in which writers could negotiate the difficulties of communication, the problems associated with the explosion of print, and the relationship between aesthetic creation and reader-response. But they also served as a rhetorical model whose form and function reminded writers of their obligation to distract readers temporarily from any such serious issues, to refresh and invigorate the minds of those bored or wearied by straightforward

discourse in the same way as contemporary diversion relieved those exhausted by the severity and monotony of routine labour.

Baroque literary theory had located the motive for "distraction" in what Robert L. Montgomery describes as "our impatience and our boredom, in our need for entertainment and diversion."[18] In the period between approximately 1690 and 1760, this traditional motive is re-configured by market-savvy writers who boldly associate the "pleasures of the text" with the actual "pleasures of the town," and who identify the threat of boredom as the main impetus behind disruptive ornament. Commercialization brought about a higher valuation of work as an important activity in itself, and of leisure as a "differentiated psychic space" which served as a foil to the tedium of progress and an alternative to work's forward momentum.[19] Commercial literature did something of the same by providing for "differentiated discursive spaces," time away from plot, character, or thematic argument in which readers could also have their minds unbent. Devices like digression played to both the material and mental needs of a pleasure-seeking public, furnishing a market that was actively assimilating contemporary theories of mind as a justification for commercial diversion. However, as this book will demonstrate, digressions were able to do so because the self-conscious authors who employed them took for granted a reading public who expected intrinsic leisure for their literature. As James Ralph puts it: "to ride Post thro' any Treatise, without Stop, Guess-work, scratching the Noddle, or grope in the Dark, is as insipid as a Fox-chace without Fatigue" (xxiv). Literature, like life, becomes dull without occasional diversion. Far from being out of place, therefore, Ralph's digressions ensure that his readers will be entertained, that their varied interests will be engaged, and, consequently, that they will be persuaded to continue reading.

In delineating a rhetoric of diversion, this book says something new about the material pleasures of art, by bringing together two previously distinct fields of critical inquiry: the history of English leisure and the development of self-conscious literature. Along the way, it re-evaluates some of the assumptions of cultural historians *and* literary historians who have tended to employ overwrought methodologies that, in my opinion, separate diversionary rhetoric from the "Reigning Diversions," and the "Reigning Diversions" from their original function as pleasurable amusement. When, in 1986, Terry Castle published her enormously influential study of the masquerade motif in eighteenth-century English fiction, she could claim that "the history of human pleasures has seldom met with the same dignified attention accorded to the history of human suffering." With

the obvious exception of theatre, Castle argued that cultural and literary history has tended to deny "intellectual significance" to such activities as "festivity, games, jokes, and amusements."[20] The past twenty-five years, however, have more than made up for this deficiency: pleasures as diverse as curiosity collecting, freak shows, pantomime, jest-books, opera, social clubs, coffeehouses, organized sports, ballooning, scientific exhibitions, pleasure resorts, waxworks, puppet shows, window-shopping, and novel reading, to name just a few, have received extensive and conspicuously "intellectual" treatment from scholars in a wide range of disciplines. In fact, so intellectual has much of this research proven that the pleasure of the original activities has seemed sometimes in danger of being overwhelmed by heady scholarly fireworks – the academic equivalent of another favourite diversion. Eighteenth-century amusement has been particularly receptive to elaborate New Historicist readings that have discovered in London's leisure activities an important site of ideological conflict and modern identity formation.

For example, in his important book on the development of pantomime and its influence on eighteenth-century British culture, John O'Brien emphasizes the anxiety produced by "pantomime's populist impulses," demonstrating how and why, in a culture of increasing censorship and surveillance, the antics of Harlequin could provide subversive commentary under the guise of disinterested entertainment. Eliding the more "local pleasures" of, say, the Lincoln's Inn Fields production of *Perseus and Andromeda: or, The Spaniard Outwitted* (1730), O'Brien explains pantomime's potential threat to "the state's power" while championing Harlequin as "a point around which vectors of deference and resistance gather." O'Brien takes the genre's "ideological" implications so seriously that he organizes the argument of his book around discussions of what he views as "pantomime's *unconscious*." Yet, as even O'Brien concedes, it is difficult to pursue such an argument "without some equivocation," given that it was obviously pantomime's very "conscious" elements – the raucous dances, elaborate stage effects, mechanical tricks, sudden appearances and disappearances, and startling transformations – that tended to seize the attention of audiences.[21] To speculate on the ways in which Harlequin undermined hegemonic authority is thus to overlook somewhat the most likely reasons for which the English public flocked to see John Rich, as Harlequin, transform himself into a spaniel or a "Statue of MERCURY."

In a similar manner, Dennis Todd explains away some of the wonder and delight of the fairground "freaks" he treats in his book on eighteenth-century monstrosity, by implicating them in learned debates over the

power of imagination and the problematic nature of human identity. Todd explores the mental and physical "*frisson*" between "the monstrous" and "the normal," arguing that the dynamics of sightseeing made the viewer who gazed, stared, and gaped at monsters on display "mindful of the very mindlessness the spectacle produces in him."[22] But were the sightseers who crowded, in 1736, into "the *Rummer* in *Three King Court*, Fleet-Street" to gawk at "a BOY and GIRL, WITH two distinct Heads and Necks, and but one Body, three Arms, and three Legs, and Feet, and 1 Foot with six Toes" really so self-aware? And to what extent can erudite treatises on philosophy, embryology, or ontology help to account for how the ordinary Londoner would actually have experienced "ONE of the greatest Curiosities in Nature"?

In her fascinating study of early modern inquiry, Barbara M. Benedict attempts to answer such questions by analysing "curiosity" itself, showing how and why the "passion" and its related "habits" came to function as an index to many of the cultural anxieties of the English during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, anxieties related to rapid urbanization and commercialization, the institutionalization of empirical science, the democratization of print, the infringement of women into the public sphere, and the topographical and temporal expansion of leisure. Benedict discusses the gradual commoditization of curiosity and its reifying effects on curious men and women, whose unbridled enthusiasm for the "Rarities" and "Novelties" on display at Gresham College or the performance of a "Bottle Conjuror" at Covent Garden, threatened to turn them into objects of curiosity.[23] Yet like O'Brien and Todd, Benedict uses her substantial research into the "Reigning Diversions of the Town" as a means to some other critical end. Instead of treating diversion as a subject that is valuable in its own right, Benedict moves in short order from a provocative material reading of how curiosity was perceived and consumed by "The Curious Eye" to complicated conceptual readings of "Women as Closeted Curiosities" and "Curiosity in the Mental Cabinet."

Julie Park does much the same in her recent book on the "correspondences" between the emergence of the genre of the novel and the fashion for new diversions and "novel objects" in eighteenth-century Britain. Park ingeniously analyses the meaning of novelty, tracing its development during the period as a "general aesthetic category," a "psychological stimulant," and, most importantly, a "feature of consumer experience." Drawing together these strains of novel discourse, she explains the multiple ways in which lifelike commodities such as dolls and popular entertainments like waxworks, automata, and puppet-shows simulated the lived