

## LITERARY MURDER

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John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997)

John Brewer, *Sentimental Murder. Love and Madness in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2004)<sup>1</sup>

Times have changed. Consider how George Orwell, in 1946, imagined the reader sitting down to a moment of pleasure.

It is Sunday afternoon, preferably before the war. The wife is already asleep in the armchair, and the children have been sent out for a nice long walk. You put your feet up on the sofa, settle your spectacles on your nose, and open the *News of the World*. Roast beef and Yorkshire, or roast pork and apple sauce, followed up by suet pudding and driven home, as it were, by a cup of mahogany-brown tea, have put you in just the right mood. Your pipe is drawing sweetly, the sofa cushions are soft underneath you, the fire is well alight, the air is warm and stagnant. In these blissful circumstances, what is it that you want to read about?

Naturally, about a murder.<sup>2</sup>

After the opening paragraph and another four words, the reader of Orwell's essay "Decline of the English Murder" is hooked. For that reason, he (the setting argues for a male reader) is unlikely to ask, "Why a murder?" Much less, "Why *naturally*, a murder?" He will want to be onto a domestic pleasure which, as Orwell teases it out, is more or less honest, which is more or less earned, and which thrives on the social hypocrisy of others gone wrong, with perhaps a dash of class vengeance. The newspaper was good for all of that.

Orwell's opening is wishful thinking. The essay goes on to tell the story of a decline and fall from Britain's "great period in murder, our Elizabethan period, so to speak", which he locates from about 1850 to 1925. The decline

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1 References in the present essay to *Pleasures of the Imagination* will be presented by page number preceded by *PI*; to *Sentimental Murder* by *SM*.

2 George Orwell, "Decline of the English Murder", in *idem, The Orwell Reader* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 379.

corresponds partly with world wars (specifically with the Second World War) and the influence of American styles of murder and cinema. The new version of murder is “meaningless story” rather than social congruence. Playful though his essay is, Orwell is making a serious point that we understand. If we try to imagine the same reader sitting down sixty years later, not only the dishes and smoking may have changed, but also the medium and its way of telling the story. What Orwell’s reader was savouring was murder considered as “the product of a stable society where the all-prevailing hypocrisy did at least ensure that crimes as serious as murder should have strong emotions behind them”. Sixty years later, in the age of the O. J. Simpson trial and drive-by hate, the hypocrisy and vengeance would still be palpable, but not the sense of closure that the Sunday afternoon reader was sure to enjoy. He could read the newspaper and then fold it up with a smile.

Both of the works under review here seek to be enjoyable. *The Pleasures of the Imagination* says so in its title, and John Brewer’s fluid prose, vast knowledge of the period and abundant illustrations make this 700-page study thoroughly entertaining, the kind of book that has something for everyone. Although compliments such as these can arouse suspicion among high-brow readers, they are not meant as blurbs for the back cover. Brewer’s success has to do with the fact that his medium is, as it were, his message. The subject of *Pleasures* is eighteenth-century culture in the making, specifically the different circumstances in which “print”, “paint” and “performance” (theatre) were transformed into cultural institutions. This is no theory of the public sphere, but an account of how concrete actions and cases came to have social importance. Grub Street leads him to copyright and the development of a world of discerning readers; painting, into market choices and the founding of the Royal Academy; theatre, from Vauxhall to edification and Garrick, and on to wider publics, in and around London, and in the provinces. The book can hardly escape being entertaining, one might say, because it tells the story of how cultural pleasures came to grip ordinary people.

Brewer is not only expert in all of these fields (to which music should be added), but he also has a wonderfully light touch. So it is in spite of all his ease and copiousness that one must feel there is something slightly threatened about this enterprise. Partly it is the *Zeitgeist*. The cultural institutions of our time are rude and disabused; they instruct us not to expect the consensual foundations on which the eighteenth century was able to build. As academics we all know about the difficulty of building bridges between university discourse and an educated but unspecialized readership outside the ivory tower. It is what makes us intellectuals. But Brewer’s example proves that the situation could be otherwise, if only because his efforts reconnect to a distinguished ancestry. In *Pleasures* he easily wears the mask of the eighteenth-century *encyclopédiste*, the writer who always finds ways

of recommending subjects to our interest. The remarks of a university professor from the period, Adam Smith, about the *Encyclopédie* certainly apply:

There are few men so learned in the science which they have peculiarly cultivated, as not to find in this work something even with regard to it which will both instruct and entertain them; and with regard to every other, they will seldom fail of finding all the satisfaction which they could desire.<sup>3</sup>

No reader is turned away, whether he or she comes for the sweeping overview or an in-depth look. And so *Pleasures* makes for a lengthy intellectual feast, as long as you “desire” to be there. Who doesn’t desire pleasure?

The situation differs slightly for *Sentimental Murder*, where Brewer tries to do the Orwellian and mix (reading) pleasure with murder. Here surfeit is not the danger; the pleasures may not please everyone. What Brewer does most successfully, and clearly aimed to do, is foreground the cultural perspectives on an eighteenth-century incident that one hesitates to call simply a murder. The death of Martha Ray outside Covent Garden Theatre one night in 1779 was apparently supposed to have been something different: she should “merely” have been witness to the suicide of a thwarted lover, who instead became her assassin, James Hackman. In all, Brewer is less intrigued by the crime, or the bungled suicide, than by the imaginations that shaped the event right from the start and then continued to reshape it through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is not the history of Ray, her keeper the fourth Earl of Sandwich, and her assassin Hackman, so much as the digest of everyone who has ever tried to say something about her death. Not history, but story; the modern (*PI* p. 189) or postmodern pleasures of Brewer’s account derive from the fact that every commentator over the last two centuries gets a part. Even if his cast were not impressively “all-star”—Boswell, Johnson, Garrick, Captain Cook, Omai, Horace Walpole and many more<sup>4</sup>—no one is to be irrelevant. For instance, Wordsworth makes an appearance for having gratuitously slipped Martha Ray’s name into a poem (“The Thorn”) written in the Lake District nineteen years after the crime. Brewer’s mild probing of that allusion may underwhelm, but sweep counts more than depth in his method. It is therefore more germane to regret that he did not put himself onstage more fully, enlarging on his own place in the story. Instead he tries to speak from the wings, in the Preface and then with an “epilogue” (*SM* p. 7)—in fact, a final chapter—that connects his project to issues in academic historiography. It is also a shame he was unable to discuss a work published about

3 Adam Smith, “Letter to the Edinburgh Review” (1756), in *idem, Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 247.

4 A few more of the eighteenth-century lights: Blackstone, Chatterton, Erasmus Darwin, Sir John Fielding, Handel, Mrs Thrale, John Wilkes and Wordsworth.

the same time as his own, by Martin Levy, that aims to tell the story of Martha Ray “straight”, yet one more time, for a contemporary audience.<sup>5</sup> Here was the perfect occasion to test the attitudes and poses of our own culture, among other things, academic vs. literary.

But to return to Orwell and pleasure, neither the encyclopedic mode nor the serial repetition of stories provides that sense of closure where all the details tally in the end. In both books Brewer has moved well beyond that neat, little world where the air is “warm and stagnant” and, once the mystery is resolved, just a faint pleasure lingers on. It is hard to know where “beyond” leaves us, apart from in the postmodern fix. But perhaps the medium is the message here as well. We can at least formulate how each of the works defeats the satisfactions of closure before getting on to questions of why.

In a casual interview Brewer has declared, “I don’t like to do the same kind of history every time”<sup>6</sup> There is indeed a “he do the police in different voices” side to the present works and to much of his career. Among other things, no historian has probably evolved so gracefully from statistical tables in his early work to illustrations from the fine arts and popular culture later on. But a talent for “graingerizing”<sup>7</sup> and a delight in variation obviously do not tell the whole story. Beyond some clear differences, a few common themes and the fact that the two books developed in their author’s mind at the same time,<sup>8</sup> there are formal ways

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5 Martin Levy, *Love and Madness: The Murder of Martha Ray, Mistress of the Fourth Earl of Sandwich* (New York: William Morrow/HarperCollins, 2004). Its release was virtually simultaneous with *Sentimental Murder*, and from the same publisher, which invites the thought of overkill. The coincidence may have been frustrating but it also enters nicely into the problems Brewer addresses.

6 The interview appears on page 6 of the separately paginated marketing section devoted to Brewer and his work at the end of *Sentimental Murder*.

7 “The collector and cleric James Grainger popularized the practice of interleaving the printed text of books of history and topography with prints—what came to be called graingerizing” (*PI*, p. 456), and so Brewer’s book here as elsewhere tells the story of where his own style and ambitions come from.

8 He notes that his interest in the murder of Martha Ray began when he reviewed G. J. Barker-Benfield’s *The Culture of Sensibility*, published in 1992 (*SM*, p. ix). A brief list of the thematic bridges might go as follows. Lord Sandwich was not only First Lord of the Admiralty but also one of the founders of the Concert of Antient Music and of the Handel centennial, a member of the Society of Dilettanti and libertine traveller into the Eastern Mediterranean, satirized as “Jemmy Twitcher” (a thief from *The Beggar’s Opera*) in lampoons; all of these details occur naturally in the course of *Pleasures*. The mixture of high and low connects also with Brewer’s evocations of Covent Garden and of the theatre’s low morals, which even include an attempted murder onstage (*PI*, p. 342), and the pressure of Italian musicians on the London music scene. The latter are not to be confused with well-mannered Germans and Austrians in London at the same time (*PI*, pp. 62, 66).

in which the works address each other. *Pleasures* tells an extraordinary number of stories— anecdotes about the arts, details of career management, lives of artists and aesthetes, and so on—that all combine and lead to one great idea of culture, whether we call it polite or, in a subsequent language of our modernity, bourgeois high culture. To that baggy synthesis *Sentimental Murder* prefers analysis, not microscopic interpretation but breakdown. Here the story is how one story can and in fact needs to be refracted into many. The diptych effect of the two books is reinforced by the way that *Pleasures* paints a very general picture of civil society's self-empowerment, which we can sum up with Brewer's phrase about the Kit-Kat Club as "a society with a purpose". This is not self-absorption so much as a sense of new resources, of individuals having "an established itinerary of cultural pleasures" (*PI* pp. 40, 67). That last phrase refers to geography within London as well as cultural practices, which Brewer at one point unites as "taste and space" (*PI* p. 228). It is this same "established" geography in *Sentimental Murder* that becomes the backdrop for a literal ambush, Hackman waiting for Miss Ray outside the theatre. Consensual patterns of behaviour turn to conflict, and from an education in the art of seeing we find ourselves in a hall of mirrors (*SM* p. 45). One other diptych effect, though I think an illusion, proceeds from the two subtitles, which are not as programmatic as they look: *English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* and *Love and Madness in the Eighteenth Century*.

The contrast in the two books is not simply between moral pleasures and immoral or impassioned or mad pleasure. As Brewer shows, plenty of the respected cultural forms had their semi- or unrespectable aspects. To begin with, this is what made Boswell like the theatre district and what made the Dilettanti Club appealing.<sup>9</sup> Martha Ray was a poor girl with a good voice; she had undeniably come up in the world when she could "sell favours in the Admiralty", as Horace Walpole nicely put it (*SM* p. 141), rather than in the street. The contrast Brewer seems to have in mind for the two books resides instead in the nature of civil empowerment. If *Pleasures* is about the historical development of institutions connected with the public discovery and procurement of pleasures that we call aesthetic, *Sentimental Murder* forms an ad hoc volume two, devoted to the prerogatives of an imagination that is not so easily, or harmoniously, socialized. Here the imagination denies us closure, whether by stopping short or by overshooting the facts, or by denigrating closure as the stuff of fiction (*SM* p. 62). If a finite reality is an aesthetic fiction, then the imagination aspires to higher, perhaps transgressive fictions.

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9 "In districts of crime and prostitution, filled with pickpockets and whores, the theatre and theatreland fed off one another. Crime spilled out of the theatre and on to the streets and then spilled back again" (*PI*, p. 350). The curtain rises on *Sentimental Murder* . . .

In 1780 a man of letters and admirer of Samuel Johnson named Herbert Croft published the most influential literary work ever written about Ray and Hackman, *Love and Madness*. Brewer borrows Croft's terms for his own subtitle (whereas Martin Levy takes them for his book), but *Sentimental Murder* is not about love and madness in any conventional, academic sense. In fact it is Croft's subtitle that seems more pertinent to Brewer's design: *A Story too True*. For, unlike Orwell, Brewer is not directly interested in crime. No wonder that he translates Orwell's "Elizabethan period" of lurid deeds into lurid words, matters of publishing. His chronology of "literary murder" (*SM* p. 232) starts several decades earlier than Orwell's, with the 1820s vogue for criminal digests like the *Newgate Calendar*. Publishing, the Grub Street journalistic and literary scene, is Brewer's surest guide to a world where the true may not be nearly true enough. Yet this unreal sense of things might have taken some very familiar modern forms. Although he toys with the idea of an eighteenth-century "media event" (*SM* p. 35) and has many examples of managed news, Brewer never develops the thought as such. Nor, in his focus on this one case, does he ever step back far enough to reflect on the public passion—the market—that developed for stories of crime (and on which the pleasure of his own book partly depends). Such angles are sketched in a few pages but not fully explored. Had Brewer done so he would not only have spoken directly to our need to understand the world we live in; he would have spared us the somewhat complacent, if plausible, view that Victorians liked the story of Martha Ray's murder because it proved their moral superiority over their Georgian forebears. Sunk into their sofas, they also liked the story of Martha Ray's murder.

Pleasures licit and illicit, high and low, become stories. In their manners of telling, both books amount to a declaration of independence—from history-writing of a more traditional kind, a genre Brewer has practised brilliantly in the past. The moral of the turn is the least original and interesting dimension of *Sentimental Murder*. All stories are artificial constructions, he seeks to remind us, and never convey the facts to the exception of presuppositions, prejudices and blindspots about ourselves. One difference from authors who sought to make this kind of point in the 1970s, whether Hayden White or Paul de Man, is that Brewer does not aim to anatomize the genre "history" or frame a theoretical position about writing or language. Accordingly he can seem mealy-mouthed; do we really gain by calling this "punctuated history" (*SM* p. 293)? Also, readers familiar with things French may be nonplussed by Brewer's claim in *Pleasures* to have been especially influenced by the writings of Pierre Bourdieu (*PI* p. 668), while not having a great deal of politicized critique to show for it. The reader must read for a long time in *Pleasures* before Brewer begins to allow that there is an intrinsically political dimension to the story being told, and by then he is in the provinces looking up, and a little critically, at London. As if the narrative of

cultural construction had to be based on broad consensus rather than on sharp conflict, there is virtually no place in his story for the Allan Ramsays and William Blakes of the painting scene (i.e. those who did not take the high institutional road, whether as “winners” like Reynolds or “losers” like Ozias Humphry, who left for India when he failed to please London with his oils),<sup>10</sup> or for deism, or for the cultural input of Methodism, that *haut lieu* of sensibility, or even for Anna Larpent’s more reasoned feelings as a dissenter, when she was not carefully recording the cultural scene and her reactions to it.

Taken together, Brewer’s two books thus seem to be pointing to ways in which we can radically recast, and/or misunderstand, our own storytelling habits. Stories “hate a hiatus” (*SM* p. 3) but they are not complete enough either. And when they are submitted to analysis they lose some of their epistemological force. *Sentimental Murder* conveys the lesson that there may be “missing stories”, fascinating untold dimensions, embedded in the life and death of Martha Ray, but nothing more. Brewer’s readers will probably wish to appeal the conviction. Surely there was more to understand, and to investigate, in Hackman’s life. (Brewer is more concerned with his testimony after the crime than in his doings before.) How theatrical a man was he? Did he care for drama and go to the theatre on other occasions or did he shun it? Why did he repeatedly enter it on the night of the murder but finally decide to perform his deed outside? And how did he explain his leaving the military shortly before the murder in order to take orders in the church? Surely too there was more to say about the milieu of Italian singers in London, beginning with two key witnesses whom Brewer never really calls to the stand, “Signor” and Caterina Galli. But it is as if, at the end of such lines of inquest, Brewer stands with gavel in hand to declare that at any rate the case is closed. Investigate as we may, there will be no solving the mystery. “These, as far as I can tell, are the ‘facts’ of the murder by James Hackman of Martha Ray” (*SM* p. 34), he concludes right at the outset. It is too true.

Here is where one might suggest, or project, a curious resemblance between Brewer and another contemporary author who felt impelled to speak of crime, madness and sexuality, Michel Foucault. There do not seem to be grounds for direct influence so much as comparable intentions regarding what Foucault would have called established discourses. Foucault’s crime story, *Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma sœur et mon frère . . .* (1973), is a stirring but

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10 “It is more likely that [Humphry] cut short his autobiography because he failed, after 1777, to follow the narrative path laid out for the successful artist. He could gather information, muster evidence, but there was no heroic story to tell” (*PI*, p. 319). The remark says something about Brewer’s own concern for a heroic story, a form of “exemplary narrative” (*PI*, p. 321).

not an enjoyable book.<sup>11</sup> In addition it is written with accents of high seriousness and critical vigilance that have no equivalent in Brewer's stylistic repertoire. Yet Brewer might well have called *Sentimental Murder* by the title Foucault gave to his chapter of *Moi, Pierre Rivière*: "Les meurtres qu'on raconte" ("the murders one tells"). Brewer's text would have gained in intelligibility, for it is never clear enough, at least to this reader, why the word "sentimental" provides the key to his whole account. (Whence the need to hear more about Italian music and operatic intrigues, for instance.<sup>12</sup>) In addition, the trotting out of all the different versions of Hackman and Ray has something mechanical and anonymous about it, that is nicely rendered by a third-person impersonal pronoun. But Foucault could also speak in the first person (plural):

Pour présenter ces documents, nous avons renoncé à utiliser une méthode typologique (dossier judiciaire, puis dossier médical). Nous les avons regroupés dans un ordre approximativement chronologique, autour des événements auxquels ils sont noués. . . . Ce discours de Rivière, nous avons décidé de ne pas l'interpréter, et de ne lui imposer aucun commentaire psychiatrique ou psychanalytique . . . parce qu'il ne nous était guère possible d'en parler sans le reprendre dans l'un de ces discours (médicaux, judiciaires, psychologiques, criminologiques) dont nous voulions parler à partir de lui. Nous lui aurions alors imposé ce rapport de force dont nous voulions montrer l'effet de réduction, et nous en aurions été à notre tour victime.<sup>13</sup>

It is remarkable that Foucault is all sobriety and lucid violence where Brewer adapts some of the same premises—the idea of resisting interpretation, the rejection of specialized disciplinary approaches—to enhance our reading pleasure. Both authors agree that something important can be learned from telling and hearing tales of murder, something more important, as it were, than the

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11 The subtitle of this collective work was *Un Cas de parricide au XIXe siècle*. Citations are from the edition "Collection Archives" (Paris: Gallimard/Julliard, 1973). Given that the work was collective, "Foucault" in my discussion must be understood broadly.

12 For instance, had Martha Ray been able to launch her career as a professional singer on the London music scene, as she apparently thought of doing, one may speculate that she would not have needed to indulge Hackman in his projects.

13 Foucault *et al.*, *Moi, Pierre Rivière*, 14: "To present these documents, we have renounced the use of a typological method (a criminal record, then a medical record). We have returned them to roughly chronological order, in relation to the events they are tied up with. . . . As for Rivière's statement [*discours*], we decided neither to interpret it, nor to project a psychiatric or psychoanalytic commentary on it. . . . for it would hardly have been possible for us to speak of his statement without locating it in one of the discourses (medical, judiciary, psychological or criminological) which, through his example, we wished to speak about. We would then have subjected him to relations of power it was our intention to show were reductive, and we in turn would have been made victims" (This and subsequent translations from Foucault are my own).



murders themselves. The latter are not lightly dismissed but they are consigned to the past. Only something of their violence is relayed. On the one hand Foucault's radical stance, the scrupulous purity and drama of it, leads to a *j'accuse* (or a *nous accusons*) aimed at contemporary society and also at the very language in which the accusation is made. On the other, Brewer's unpretentious, "polite" and multifarious vein makes no pitch for revolution, but for an educated shrug of the shoulders, a certain distance taken on our habits of speech and knowledge. If we could revive him Orwell's reader might well prefer the unhappy consciousness of *Moi, Pierre Rivière*.

To put it somewhat reductively, where Foucault brandishes the power of *parole*, Brewer advocates *langue*. Where Foucault decries and apprehends falling victim to his own language, Brewer profits comfortably from his membership in the club—not a selective group so much as a world of habits. Perhaps we should speak of habits of cultural performance, as in "The audiences were not passive but incorporated culture as part of their social performance" (*PI* p. 69). The audience performs as much as the actors; where the latter perform a play, society performs—culture. Partly for these reasons what Foucault cannot show as clearly as Brewer are the mediations, the cultural quid pro quos that mean that a tale of murder is not a murderous weapon in the hands of society but instead—a text. "Les meurtres qu'on raconte" depend upon the forming and deforming power of the imagination and social violence. But texts are also part of this nexus, along with oral culture and the passage back and forth from one to the other. Each of these states has its dangers; one need only think of the powerful overdetermination of a work that prompted acts of suicide in its day, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. So Brewer's insistence on the cultural story is part and parcel of the phenomenon he studies, as if history would otherwise get too quickly and summarily to the point. In *Love and Madness* Croft had already undertaken to derive the reality of Hackman and Ray from literature. Croft's epigraph erases the lover's crime in favour of the couple's shared passion, by suggesting a model from Thomas Southerne's Restoration tragedy *Oroonoko*. Croft and *Romeo and Juliet* notwithstanding, it might have been more fruitful to explore Hackman's Freudian slip—killing his beloved when he meant only to commit suicide before her eyes—by comparing a key passage in Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*, which describes a similar penchant.<sup>14</sup> And the example of Werther was, as Brewer notes only in passing (*SM* p. 180), available to Hackman as well. If stories and crimes can become so intermingled by

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14 The "horrible tentation de Saint-Preux", murder followed by suicide, is not carried out but it may well have informed Hackman's imagination, along with all the other perspectives on his act. Cf. the end of the fourth part of Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). Brewer notes the popularity of Rousseau in British libraries in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (*PI*, p. 84).

the telling, then we might conclude that, for quite unusual reasons, *Sentimental Murder* had to be a work of literary criticism more than of history.

The interesting problem is that this literary orientation is not peculiar to *Sentimental Murder*. It may already be at work in *Pleasures*, and not only because Brewer takes a new angle on what we were once in the habit of calling “literary history” or because he suggests ways in which the rising world of “authors” and publishers influenced the sister arts. In the creation of culture too, the facts are never useful enough. They become “facts”, mediations, and the question then is to know how the mediations connect and where they lead. (If an encyclopedia foregoes alphabetical order, how can it end?) *Pleasures* is so sweeping an account that one may conclude that eighteenth-century England’s creation of polite modern culture deserves to be thought of as its ultimate achievement. The “national heritage” ends up seeming the English *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In Brewer’s telling it is all in the accumulation—print, paint and theatre, and then in a key chapter devoted to “borrowing, copying and collecting”. Culture is no doubt a matter of reproduction and amassing as well as of production, but these acts should not be confused with self-creation. This may explain why Brewer drifts effortlessly but too implicitly, it seems to me, from the arts to the nation, as if power in one defined citizenship and political power in the other, the larger national frame. The point is arguable, and worth arguing. Why, for instance, did the Royal Society of 1662 differ so greatly in its social effects from the Royal Academy of 1768? The Royal Society only half-emerged from the coffee-house culture of the day, maintaining fluid relations with that culture and a variety of other social and religious practices. In contrast, the success of the Royal Academy seemed to depend on the fact that it was formalized, set apart (not only from “the public” but even from enlightened connoisseurship; *PI* p. 272) and was thereby empowered to arbitrate in matters of public taste. As for the question of identity, Brewer does not give us enough help in seeing the articulations whereby “the fugitive spirit of English culture” (*PI* p. xxx) produced Britain. Or was it that English *Pleasures* produced the British *Imagination*?<sup>15</sup> And are we altogether able to say what makes pleasures English or British in a world where cultural forms, anxieties and acts of literary pirateering circulated back and forth across the Channel, the Irish Sea and the Atlantic Ocean? Any number of positions and counter-positions await exploration here, but it is striking that Brewer did not feel compelled to take them on. He arranges his chapters to lead to “the nation” as if this had to be the natural goal of the ordering of the arts, so natural in fact that he bases his final argument on rather tendentious examples: the stylizing of the landscape, tourism and “natural rural order” (*PI* p. 645).

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15 *English* in the book’s subtitle gives way to a final section, Part VII, entitled “Britain”. Assertions of Britishness in the text (e.g. *PI*, p. 463) are not always easy to compass.

Needless to say, the story of English culture does not blend seamlessly into nature, any more than it relies on the presence of the British state. What is more to the point here is that it develops with direct access to power. Like Foucault's or Orwell's tales of murder, it can be viewed as "une histoire sans maîtres".<sup>16</sup> That is part of the Sunday afternoon reader's fun when for a few vacant, dreamy hours he can trespass and pretend he is God. "Without masters" also means without a master discourse; the reality of culture is not only national or financial, international or aesthetic or political. It is also political,<sup>17</sup> and that complex fact is somehow kept at arm's length—in *Pleasures* to tell the story of civil society's creation of culture and in *Sentimental Murder* to break away from academe, where political history is the only history worth the telling. Brewer has made it a point more than once in his distinguished career as a historian to try to escape, or write beyond, the discourse of establishment politics. This has led him, richly, into such fields as journalism, consumer culture, the arts and perhaps into illustration as such. But it is here that the example of Foucault, and his desire to avoid the established languages of medicine, criminology, psychiatry, and so on, may prove instructive. For there is another dimension in Brewer's desire to turn away and provide a basis for the history of civil society. What the comparison with Foucault brings out is not "an alternative structure of politics" such as the press or parliamentary lobbying groups,<sup>18</sup> but something far less structured. In place of Foucault's mad sense of the ubiquity of murder

Le meurtre rôde aux confins de la loi, en deçà ou au-delà de la loi, au-dessus ou au-dessous; il tourne autour du pouvoir tantôt contre lui, tantôt avec lui. Le récit du meurtre se case dans cette région dangereuse dont il utilise la réversibilité: il fait communiquer l'interdit et la soumission, l'anonymat avec l'héroïsme; par lui l'infamie touche à l'éternité.<sup>19</sup>

16 Foucault *et al.*, *Moi, Pierre Rivière*, 270.

17 The same argument, applied to religion, has been developed in a number of works by J. C. D. Clark. In terms of culture and politics, it is instructive to note Raymond Williams's experience in writing about the period 1780–1950: "I had originally intended to keep very closely to *culture* itself, but, the more closely I examined it, the more widely my terms of reference had to be set". See the Introduction to *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966 [first published 1958]), xv–xvii; original emphasis.

18 See John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). One section of the book, entitled both as "Part III: An Alternative Structure of Politics" and as "Chapter 8: The Press in the 1760s", concerns opposition to the ideologists of the Whig oligarchy and the Tory pragmatists. Lobbies are discussed in the final section and chapter of Brewer's *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

19 Foucault *et al.*, *Moi, Pierre Rivière*, 271. "Murder hovers on the edge of the law, on the near and the far side of the law, above and beneath it; murder revolves around power, sometimes on its side, sometimes against it. The murder narrative inhabits this dangerous

Both *Pleasures* and *Sentimental Murder* might easily have pointed to the spilling over of a new kind of discourse, “politics”, into every aspect of life, including cultural construction. The diffusion of a new public sense is something Brewer has helped readers to understand in the past. The process has such breadth that he likened it, in his earlier work, to the way that literacy was transmitted, though not necessarily taught, to the illiterate, and to the way that “every man, woman, and child, is by instinct, birth and inheritance” not a citizen but, in a term gaining unusual (and to some observers, mad) scope in the 1760s, “a politician”.<sup>20</sup> In this view the “political nation” is not so much a place of stolid consensus, or growing agreement among provinces, or organized critical opposition, as a congeries of opinions. If the latter are more or less political, and capable of embodying conflicts,<sup>21</sup> they are also just opinions, communicating neither knowledge nor deception as such, but only their own truth: opinions, words, for what they are worth.

This rather unedifying perspective on civil society allows us to reconsider such moments as Martha Ray’s apprehension about the violent demonstrations at the gates of the Admiralty (*SM* p. 14), when the mob clamoured against the conduct of the war with the colonies and France. The point is not only that she was defending her new place in society. Her murder would have nothing *directly* to do with such events, or the political ballads being chanted, and nothing *mediately* that we can know or ascertain. But both dimensions need to be considered. Brewer will seem to stand on the cusp of the problem when he refuses both to reduce the murder to any one truth, and at the same time to say “all of the above”, that all of the hypotheses have their value. He appears less inclusive in his practice when it comes to culture. What if modern cultural institutions were not the organization of that possibility of endless social chatter, but also the rampart against it? The situation is complex because telling stories (or singing ballads) is not only an act with its own culture, but perhaps the cultural act par excellence. As such it is not (one wants to say, “never”) gratuitous. Stories invent, distort and have their backlash. And literature too ends up taking its place—i.e. a limited place—in the attempt to provide a stabilizing master narrative.

To mention one very small detail, Brewer’s publishing history may surprise for being so free with the printed word. He cites accounts with at least three different

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zone and makes use of its reversibility: it joins interdiction to submission, anonymity to heroism; thanks to the murder narrative, infamy reaches eternity.”

20 Brewer, *Party Ideology*, 155 (for the technical term “bridging” in connection with literacy), 140.

21 Cf. “The presence during the 1760s of so many conflicting views about how we ought to interpret political conduct is, thanks to the combined efforts of whig and tory historiography, one of the most conspicuous features of the decade. Conflict not consensus appears to dominate” (*Party Ideology*, 32).

spellings of his famous protagonist's name: Martha Ray, Wray and Reay. These gratuitous (and typical) variations dramatize in their own way the fact that there could be no agreement, no print authority, for one version of her story. The rules of an oral world still enter into the account. This too is part of the relevance of Wordsworth's "The Thorn" and its largely unmotivated use of the name of Martha Ray, all the more since her surname supplies the rhyme in two of its three occurrences.

The role of stories may be even clearer in another poem from *Lyrical Ballads*, the rather silly "Goody Blake and Harry Gill". Here once again a literary work happens to claim veracity in its subtitle, "A True Story".<sup>22</sup> The poem tells of neither murder, nor love, but of two opposing forms of murderous intent and some madness. "Auld Goody Blake", a poor spinner, lives in decent misery during the summer and even enjoys life: "Then at her door the *canty* dame/Would sit, as any linnet gay".<sup>23</sup> But in winter coal has become too expensive, her subsistence is threatened, and the old woman must steal wood from a hedge to stay warm. Harry Gill, who owns the hedge and may be the kind of prosperous young person on his way to cultural improvement, catches Goody at it and shakes her with real violence. She defends herself by uttering a prayer or curse: "God! Who art never out of hearing,/O may he never more be warm!". The power of cant turns to something like incantation. It transforms Harry, whose odd symptom becomes the poem's noisy refrain: "His teeth they chatter, chatter still". Harry loses the ability to speak because all he can do is chatter. There is no further mention of Goody Blake, or of whether she returns to her "canty" ways. But the point seems to be that an old woman in 1798, who is not a witch, had been empowered in

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22 William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971 [first published 1798]), 50–55. The original "Advertisement" to the volume remarks that "The tale of Goody Blake and Harry Gill is founded on a well-authenticated fact which happened in Warwickshire" (4). Here, too, being a fact was not enough; it "happened" and it was "well-authenticated". In 1800 Wordsworth returned to the matter in an enlarged preface. "I wished [in 'Goody Blake'] to draw attention to the truth that the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous. The truth is an important one; the fact (for it is a *fact*) is a valuable illustration of it. And I have the satisfaction of knowing that it has been communicated to many hundreds of people who would never have heard of it, had it not been narrated as a Ballad . . ." (174–5; original emphasis). Wordsworth omits to mention that he himself (and presumably others) had learned of the case from a work in prose, Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia*. He counts on the superior influence of lyrical ballads.

23 The editor, W. J. B. Owen, refers to the *OED* and glosses "canty" as Scottish or North English dialect, meaning "cheerful" (*ibid.*, 132). But the context implies a more specific relation to speech, chatter or gossip. Also, the poem is set in Dorsetshire (l. 29) and Wordsworth did not see fit to gloss the word he put in italics. *Lyrical Ballads* was published in London.

her ordinary use of language. It is no banal event that she rises above making noise. Indeed, it informs a poetic project that will sound like Brewer's own. As Wordsworth wrote in the "Advertisement" to the volume,

The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure.<sup>24</sup>

The democratization of pleasures and of speech is the horizon of both of Brewer's works, just as it is embodied in the way he writes and illustrates for a general educated public. But the violent elements of "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" remind us that there is still a political dimension—a play of forces in society—that Wordsworth puts front and centre without allowing us to dismiss them with facile labels, as superstition or psychopathology. Not to mention poor noisy Harry Gill.

Historians have always known that stories as well as actions have their effects. That is why, primordially, there has always been something dangerous and political about the writing of history. Brewer's reticence about this danger is therefore understandable, and it endows *Sentimental Murder*, in particular, with a cool modern scepticism. Brewer is not doubting that Martha Ray lived and died. Our world has far too much information for that. But even as he illuminates much about the lives of libertines, ambitious mistresses and the reading public, Brewer may be too disposed to allow that the best answer to a question is another question (*SM* p. 5 *et passim*) and to admit the gratuitous as such, renouncing the need to interpret. As a result, when he does favor some stories over others, as in *Pleasures*, there is no sense of why this is just. "Anxieties" about politeness, or sentimental reactions against it, do not tell us enough. Politeness too is a "hall of mirrors" (*PI* p. 118).

Thus, along with a great deal of pleasure, both books leave us with reservations of a peculiar kind. In 1779, with the war in America raging, a former officer in the British army shot and killed the mistress of the Lord of the Admiralty. Or rather, in 1779, during Great Britain's war with its American "brethren", a newly ordained clergyman in the Church of England turned a gun on the woman he loved and then attempted, unsuccessfully, to take his own life. Or rather, the eighteenth-century theatre was a dangerous place, for society put itself on stage, and murders could happen inside or out. In 1779, for instance. None of these tellings is right, of course.

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24 Ibid., p. 3.