This volume provides a valuable contribution to our knowledge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual life inside and outside Germany.

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This elegant collection of essays ranges across eighteenth and nineteenth-century thought, covering philosophy, science, literature and religion in the 'Age of Goethe.' A recognized authority in the field, Nisbet grapples with the major voices of the Enlightenment and gives pride of place to the figures of Lessing, Herder, Goethe and Schiller.

The book ranges widely in its compass of thought and intellectual discourse, dealing incisively with themes including the philosophical implications of literature and the relationship between religion, science and politics. The result is an accomplished reflection on German thought, but also on its rebirth, as Nisbet argues for the relevance of these Enlightenment thinkers for the readers of today.

The first half of this collection focuses predominantly on eighteenth-century thought, where names like Lessing, Goethe and Herder, but also Locke and Voltaire, feature. The second has a wider chronological scope, discussing authors such as Winckelmann and Schiller, while branching out from discussions of religion, philosophy and literature to explore the sciences. Issues of biology, early environmentalism, and natural history also form part of this volume. The collection concludes with an examination of changing attitudes towards art in the aftermath of the 'Age of Goethe.'

The essays in this volume are brought together in this collection to present Nisbet's widely-acclaimed perspectives on this fascinating period of German thought. It will be of interest to scholars and students of the intellectual life of Europe during the Enlightenment, while its engaging and lucid style will also appeal to the general reader.
Apart from his published works—of which *The Life of John Buncle, Esq.* was easily the most successful—little is known of Thomas Amory, described in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as an ‘eccentric writer’. The son of one Councillor Amory who accompanied William III to Ireland and acquired extensive property in County Clare, he was probably born in 1691. He may have been born in London, to which he returned after spending a substantial period in Dublin; he subsequently pursued his work as a writer and became a virtual recluse. He died at an advanced age in 1788, survived by his only son.

*The Life of John Buncle, Esq.* is a novel in autobiographical form, and there are some similarities between the career of the eponymous hero and that of the author. As the hero tells us, ‘I was born in London and carried as an infant to Ireland, where I learned the Irish language, and became intimately acquainted with its original inhabitants’ (I,vii). He spent his childhood, we are told, ‘at Bagatrogh Castle, my father’s seat...
in Mall-Bay, on the coast of Galway’ (II, 525) and studied for five years in Dublin, at Trinity College (I, 4 and II, 146), before embarking on an extended tour of northern England, the account of which occupies most of the novel. After marrying seven wives in quick succession and losing each in turn through illness or accident, he goes off on a voyage of circumnavigation—of which no details are supplied in the novel—and finally settles in London to write his memoirs.

Buncle’s expeditions over the fells of Westmorland, Durham, and Yorkshire follow a recurrent pattern with only minor variations. After traversing previously unscaled crags, terrifying abysses, bottomless lakes, blazing outcrops of bitumen, and tortuous potholes, he arrives in a secluded and idyllic valley where he encounters one or more women of exceptional beauty, erudition, and affluence, usually associated with a religious community dedicated to a Unitarian faith opposed to both Anglican orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. After an interval of elegant living and dining, during which Buncle holds forth at length on theology in particular—although he is equally capable of discoursing on such diverse subjects as algebra, microscopy, ethics, bibliography, medicine, conchology, and politics—he marries his hostess and enjoys a brief period of bliss, which is abruptly terminated by his wife’s untimely death. The hero, now enriched by his deceased partner’s fortune, then resumes the cycle of mountaineering, learned discourse, matrimony, and bereavement. During his travels, he repeatedly chances upon acquaintances from his Irish past, most of whom, like Buncle himself, are decidedly eccentric.

It is not at first sight obvious why this curious work, when it became known in Germany during the 1770s, should have provoked responses

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3 The German commentators speak of eight, presumably because Friedrich Nicolai cites this number in his preface to the German translation: Leben Bemerkungen und Meinungen Johann Bunkels nebst den Leben verschiedener merkwürdiger Frauenzimmer. Aus dem engländischen übersetzt, 4 vols (Berlin: Nicolai, 1778). On the history of this work’s publication and the identity of the editor (Hermann Andreas Pistorius) and translator (Raimarus von Spieren) see Alexander Košenina, ‘Zur deutschen Übersetzung zweier Romane Thomas Amorys und der sich anschliessenden Fehde zwischen Wieland und Nicolai’, Daphnis 18 (1989), 179–98. The second novel included in this translation, Amory’s Leben verschiedener merkwürdiger Frauenzimmer, will not be considered here, since it played no significant part in the controversy over the main novel.

4 Miss Maria Spence is typical of these women, possessing (in addition to considerable wealth) ‘the head of Aristotle, the heart of a primitive Christian, and the form of Venus de Medicis’ (II, 162).
ranging from delight and admiration to indignation and contempt. On the one hand, it was the main inspiration of Friedrich Nicolai’s novel *Sebaldus Nothanker* (1773–76), and Moses Mendelssohn recommended it with enthusiasm to Lessing, who was sufficiently impressed to consider translating it himself. A translation by another writer was subsequently commissioned by Nicolai, with sixteen engravings by the celebrated Daniel Chodowiecki, and published, after considerable publicity and a highly successful subscription, in 1778. On the other hand, Christian Garve found Buncle’s learned disquisitions so unoriginal and platitudinous that he had difficulty finishing the book, and the plot likewise failed to capture his interest. Wieland, for his part, was so incensed by the novel that he published a circumstantial denunciation, in five instalments, in his *Der Teutsche Merkur*; this elicited a bitter counter-attack from Nicolai, to which Wieland duly responded, and a further counterblast from Nicolai appeared shortly afterwards (1779). The dispute between the two writers became the object of a feeble satire by August Friedrich Cranz (1779), and a satirical sequel to the novel itself, published anonymously by Andreas Stein, appeared a few years later.

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7 Garve to Nicolai, 9 February 1771 (quoted from the unpublished original by Košenina, ‘Zur deutschen Übersetzung […],’ p. 182).
9 Friedrich Nicolai, [advertisement and call for subscriptions] in *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*, 31 (1777), unpaginated notices at end of this volume, pp. [1] and [3]; ‘Ein paar Worte betreffend Johann Bunkel und Christoph Martin Wieland’, (Berlin and Stettin: no publisher named, 1779); this also appeared in 1778 in a supplementary volume to the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*.
12 [August Friedrich Cranz], ‘Fragment eines Schreibens über den Ton in den Streitschriften einiger teutischen Gelehrten und Schöngeister’ (no author, place of publication or publisher named, 1779); the British Library holds a copy of this wordy and puerile performance, which begins with satirical allusions to Amory’s novel and Nicolai’s German edition, but soon loses all contact with them. Košenina, ‘Zur deutschen Übersetzung […],’ p. 194 lists two supplementary pieces by Cranz, published in 1779 and 1781 respectively, which I have been unable to consult.
The dispute between Nicolai and Wieland was exacerbated by an earlier disagreement, and not least by the fact that Wieland’s *Der Teutsche Merkur* and Nicolai’s *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* were currently engaged in a circulation war. Nevertheless, real issues of literary criticism were involved, and Wieland’s polemic embodies a serious, if one-sided, reading of Amory’s novel. The aim of the present essay is to examine briefly the main arguments involved, with a view to defining more precisely the literary status of this problematic novel and the reasons why it met with such divergent reactions in Germany.

The most obviously contentious feature of the novel was, of course, its unorthodox treatment of religion. Buncle’s hostility towards the Athanasian Creed and its doctrine of the Trinity—a hostility which, ironically enough, he seems to have absorbed from his tutor at Trinity College Dublin (I, 379)—his obsessive advocacy of Unitarianism,14 his opposition to supernaturalism and defence of natural religion, and his evident debt to the English and French freethinkers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries15 doubtless account for much of the novel’s appeal to the Berlin Aufklärer. Mendelssohn, for example, regarded the Trinity as logically absurd, and held that Unitarianism was closely akin to his own Jewish faith.16 Lessing’s positive response to the novel when he first read it (in English) in 1771 was certainly influenced by the same factors, but his enthusiasm waned, as he explained to Nicolai eight years later, when he began to take Christian orthodoxy more seriously during the ensuing period, and to find Unitarianism (or Arianism) unsatisfactory in spite of its superficially greater rationality.17 These writers would also have found little to quarrel with in Buncle’s

14 Or, more precisely, of Socinianism: he recognises Christ as an object of worship, but denies his divinity (II, 247f. and 255f.).
15 He names Locke as his chief intellectual mentor (I, 6), but his long discussion of contradictions in the gospels (I, 451–94) shows familiarity with works by Toland, Morgan, Collins, Simon and many others. His bibliographical references should be treated with caution, however, since some of his authorities—for example, ‘the Rev. Athanasian Bigot’ (II, 528) are plainly fictitious.
fulminations against Catholicism—‘the diabolism of popery’ (I, 344), with its worship of ‘the tiny god of dough’ (II, 491)—even if Nicolai and Pistorius (the editor whom Nicolai appointed to supervise the translation of the novel) considered it politic to delete or tone down the more extreme anti-Catholic passages in order to secure the imperial privilege for the work’s publication. Nicolai still felt able, however, to reassure potential subscribers in respect of Buncle’s religious views: ‘They are to be highly recommended to all readers who are prepared to reflect seriously on religious matters.’

Wieland’s objections to the novel, however, had little to do with its religious unorthodoxy. He was, after all, a product of the Aufklärung himself and—at least in his mature years—sympathetic towards liberal opinions in theology. Buncle’s liberal attitudes were in accord with Wieland’s in other respects too, as in the following passage on women’s intellectual capacities and education: ‘Learning and knowledge are perfections in us not as we are men, but as we are rational creatures, in which order of being the female world is upon the same level as the male [...]. And if women of fortune were so considered, and educated accordingly, I am sure the world would soon be the better for it’ (II, 281; cf. also I, 273f.). Nevertheless, Buncle’s attitude towards women is fundamental to Wieland’s criticism of the novel—and indeed to any interpretation of the work. It accordingly calls for further discussion here.

Buncle has two obsessions in life, one of which is Unitarian theology. The other is women. In his own words (II, 483f.):

As I was born with the disease of repletion, and had made a resolution not to fornicate, it was incumbent on me to have a sister and companion, with whom I might lawfully carry on the succession [...] And if [...] I was to live for ages, and by accidents lost such partners as I have described; I would with rapture take hundreds of them to my breast, one after another, and piously propagate the kind.

As a modern editor of the novel comments, ‘John Buncle is a Mormon born out of due time’:19 his repeated marriages are as close as he can

18 Nicolai [advertisement and call for subscribers], in Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek, 31 (1777), Zweites Stück, p. [3] of unpaginated notices at end of volume.
get to polygamy without violating legal and religious prohibitions, and death is always at hand to ensure a brisk turnover of spouses. The novel is full of erotic suggestion, often of a polygamous kind, as when Buncle discovers the beautiful Azora at the head of a religious community consisting solely of women, a plague having carried off all the men. Such episodes recall The Isle of Pines of 1668, with its polygamous narrator on his desert island.\textsuperscript{20} The absence of effective male competition adds relish to Buncle’s enjoyment, and his encounter with the lovely widow Imelda gains piquancy from the thought of her deceased husband, ‘Sir Loghlin Fitzgibbons, an old Irish knight, who was immensely rich, and married her when he was creeping on all fours, with snow on his head, and frost in his bones, that he might lie by a naked beauty, and gaze at that awful spot he had no power to enjoy’ (II, 185). The private medical studies which Buncle subsequently takes up suggest to him a more ingenious way of overcoming the restrictions of monogamy when he happens to dissect a woman of unusual anatomy: as he tells us, ‘there was found two vaginas, and a right and left uterus’ (II, 445). He decides, however, that the risk of superfetation would outweigh any advantages which such a wife might offer, and concludes ‘I should not chuse to marry a woman with two vaginas, if it was possible to know it before wedlock’. (Nicolai’s editor, the clergyman Pistorius, understandably omitted this passage from the German translation.)

All this is squarely in the Rabelaisian tradition,\textsuperscript{21} of course (although Amory’s novel, unlike the work of Rabelais, has no satirical element, and the narrator himself is without any sense of humour or irony), and it would not have shocked the broader-minded among eighteenth-century readers unduly. Wieland, who often sailed close to the wind himself in his treatment of erotic subjects, was nevertheless scandalised by Buncle’s behaviour. But what offended him was not so much Buncle’s polygamous inclinations as his unconvincing attempts to lend them moral and religious respectability. One of Buncle’s objections to Catholicism, for example, is to its requirement of priestly celibacy, and he points out in one of his learned digressions that many priests, and


even saints, of the early Church—including St Peter himself—were married (II, 128ff.). He also resorts to the most questionable variety of casuistry in his (inevitably successful) attempts to talk the reluctant beauty Statia into matrimony: ‘Oppose not the gospel covenant [...] I will pour out my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring [...] it must be a great crime, to deprive children of this intailed heavenly inheritance, by our resolving to live in a state of virginity. In my opinion, it is a sin greater than murder’ (II, 46f.). Wieland, who describes this argument as ‘the most perfect ideal of impertinence and insanity that was ever shaken out of a human brainbox’, concludes: ‘The most infamous thing about this is that religion always has to serve as a figleaf to cover the nakedness of his goatish old Adam’.22

There can be no doubt that, especially in the second volume of the original novel (which was published ten years after the first), Buncle’s high moral tone and habitual concern with outward respectability progressively diminish. He is less fastidious in his choice of company, and some of the Irish friends from his student days whom he encounters on his travels are plainly delinquents (and, one suspects, representatives of Buncle’s own half-repressed inclinations). These include Jack Gallaspy, whose exploits he recounts with evident relish (‘He debauched all the women he could, and many whom he could not corrupt, he ravished’) and Tom Gollogher, who ‘left nineteen daughters he had by several women a thousand pounds each. This was acting with a temper worthy of a man’ (II, 150 and 155f.). During a stay in London, he tours the brothels in the company of the bookseller and pornographer Edmund Curll (one of several real personages who make a disconcerting appearance in the novel). His excuse for such visits—that they were made only ‘on account of the purity of the wine, and the stillness of the house’ (II, 388)—will convince few readers; his real interest, of course, is in the inmates, and his long narrative of the career of Carola Bennet, a reformed prostitute (II, 384–400), reads like an extract from John Cleland’s Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure.

The nadir of Buncle’s moral development is reached, however, when he abducts two attractive wards of Old Cock, a wealthy curmudgeon, in order to recoup his gambling losses (II, 201), and later elopes with

22 Wieland, ‘Die Bunkliade’, in Der Teutsche Merkur (1778), Viertes Vierteljahr, pp. 66 and 73.
another miser’s daughter in order to boost his fortune (II, 411f.). These lapses, together with the priggish and pharisaical way in which he seeks to exonerate his own conduct while censuring the moral shortcomings of others (apart from his old cronies) are among the most frequent targets of Wieland’s criticism, summed up in his description of Buncle as ‘neither more nor less than a selfish anti-trinitarian idler, lecher, and libertine, of no use to God or the world’.

But the main reason for Wieland’s indignation, and for the lengths to which he goes in order to justify and express it, is not so much the novel itself as the contrast between it and the claims which Nicolai had made for it in his advertisement to potential subscribers. For Nicolai had emphasised ‘[the] goodheartedness, good humour, and noble philanthropy which runs throughout the work’ and described the hero as a man who looks back on his life ‘with a good conscience and complete awareness of having been irreproachable and useful’. Such claims, Wieland contends, amount to a brazen misrepresentation, a ploy to increase the sales of a worthless book: ‘From his [Nicolai’s] hand we have the repugnant changeling of an Irish non-conformist crossbreed of zealot and freethinker in place of a pleasant, useful, witty and edifying work.’

Ought we therefore to conclude that the appeal of Amory’s novel to such readers as Nicolai, Mendelssohn, and Lessing consisted exclusively in its liberal views on religion, and that it was otherwise, as Wieland suggested, devoid of all poetic as well as moral merit? Such a verdict would be premature, above all because it takes insufficient account of the novel’s literary qualities. It is with these that the remainder of this essay will be concerned.

Nicolai, like any enterprising publisher, spared no effort to present his product in the most favourable light possible. In order to do so, he emphasised the novel’s affinities with as many famous writers and popular tendencies in literature as he could. He knew from the start, of course, that the prestige of English literature was currently such that almost any hitherto untranslated novel could expect reasonable sales; but if it could also be shown to bear comparison with the works

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24 Nicolai, as in note 17 above, pp. [1] and [3].
of the greatest English writers, its commercial success was effectively guaranteed. He accordingly wrote in his advertisement of 1777:

He [i.e. Buncle] is perfectly unique in himself, and as original in his own way as Shakespeare or Samuel Richardson, although with this difference, that their perfections stem solely from an innate uncultivated genius, whereas Buncle’s sublime peculiarity seems to be the fruit of a genius and imagination that have been heated and led to sprout, as if in a hothouse, by a romantic nature and religious zeal.

All the signals were there for the fashionable German readership of the 1770s, from the names of the most idolised English writers to such catchwords as ‘original’, ‘genius’, and ‘sublime peculiarity’; and for good measure, Nicolai’s translator rendered the novel’s title The Life of John Buncle, Esq. as Life, Observations and Opinions of John Buncle, with its echo of Sterne’s immensely popular Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy (and of Nicolai’s own successful Life and Opinions of Sebaldus Nothanker, on whose format and outward appearance those of the new translation were modelled).

This comparison with Shakespeare and Richardson was, of course, grossly inflated, and it was duly ridiculed by Wieland. Nevertheless, it did not originate with Nicolai, for as his advertisement makes clear, this particular passage is a quotation, translated from the remarks of an anonymous English critic in the Monthly Review of 1766. This evidence that Amory’s novel had its admirers in England as well as in Germany should at least be borne in mind before Nicolai’s positive judgement is dismissed as purely self-interested; in fact, even his favourable view of Buncle’s moral character has its counterpart in another passage which he translated from the same English review: ‘For all his oddity, he always displays the character of an honest man, full of earnest desire to promote the welfare of his fellow men and eagerly in pursuit of what he considers to be the cause of truth.’ The association with Sterne, moreover, is not entirely gratuitous (although the two novelists are plainly of a very different calibre). The autobiographical form, the constant digressions, the personal hobbyhorses and the eccentricity of

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26 Nicolai, as in note 18 above, p. 133.
28 Nicolai, as in note 18 above, p. 133; Monthly Review, 35 (1766), p. 34.
29 Nicolai, ibid.
the characters are genuine points of similarity, even if the differences—such as Amory’s complete lack of irony—are fundamental. (It is perhaps worth adding that there can be no question of *Tristram Shandy* having influenced Amory’s novel significantly, for its first volume appeared more than four years after the first volume of *The Life of John Buncle, Esq.* was published.)

Apart from the novel’s affinities with specific English writers, Nicolai was also at pains to emphasise its realistic aspects, no doubt in view of the fact that realism in fiction had grown in popularity since the time of Fielding, in Germany no less than in Britain. There are indeed certain realistic features in Amory’s work, such as its genuinely autobiographical elements (for example, the narrator’s account of his studies), its description of various identifiable localities, its portraits of low life in London, and its observations on science and natural history. For much of the time, however, Amory’s love of the bizarre and the fantastic, together with his addiction to hyperbole, relegate such tendencies to a subordinate position. Nicolai nevertheless did his utmost to magnify them, explaining the more conspicuous oddities of personality and behaviour as characteristic of English provincial society. Thus, he accounts for the omnipresence of erudite young women in Stainmore Forest and the valleys of Westmorland by pointing out ‘that in England, an understanding of many truths important to mankind is more widely distributed, and less confined to major cities and exalted circles than in other countries’, and he attributes the remarkable fondness of such ladies for theological speculation to the wild and ‘romantic’ nature of their mountainous surroundings. This insistence on the work’s realistic character (*wahrscheinlich* is the term Nicolai uses), is no doubt also designed to reinforce his contention that the novel is full of practical educational value.

Such were Nicolai’s principal claims in that advertisement to which Wieland took such exception. It certainly contains exaggerations and distortions, particularly with regard to the novel’s moral significance and its standing in English literature (although there were precedents for such judgements in earlier criticism); and Nicolai’s endeavours to associate the work with such different types of literature as realistic

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30 Nicolai, as in note 18 above, p. 133.
31 Ibid.
fiction, autobiography, the picturesque tour, and the novel of religious edification and moral instruction sound very much like an attempt to make it seem all things to all men. Nevertheless, there is evidence that his lack of precision is, at least to some extent, the result of genuine uncertainty as to how to classify an idiosyncratic text which incorporates characteristics of a whole series of literary forms. He accordingly describes it as ‘a novel, if one will’, and admits that ‘this story […] does not have the profile of a formal novel intended to follow a single main action through in accordance with a consciously devised plan’; he then proceeds to note its affinities with autobiography. He might also have added, with equal justification, that it contains elements of other types of fiction as well, including the erotic novel, the literature of fantasy (like the memoirs of Baron Munchhausen, published a few years later), and above all the picaresque novel; but none of these forms was sufficiently respectable to accord with the high moral claims which Nicolai wished to make for the work. Interestingly enough, Wieland was just as uncertain as to the precise literary category to which Amory’s novel belonged. But instead of attributing this uncertainty to the originality and uniqueness of the work, he argued more harshly that the work was worthless by any literary definition, and finally described it as a ‘rhapsody’, a term indicative of disorder and formlessness:

That John Buncle’s life and opinions, as delivered to us by the bookseller Nicolai, is in every respect—whether as a true life-history, a philosophical and Christian novel, a work of genius, wit or taste, or as a moral book written to instruct and teach by example—a highly insipid scrawl and a rhapsody filled with ill-reasoned ratiocinations, false principles and offensive examples; […] all this requires no other proof than that someone to whom God has given reason and five senses should also pray for the measure of patience needed in order to read this book […].

Thus, just as there was no agreement about the novel’s literary merit, so also was there no agreement about its literary form—nor has there been any since. An interesting more recent attempt to define its place in literary history is that of Ian Campbell Ross, who suggests that the main reason why the novel has on the whole been ignored by historians

32 Ibid.
33 Wieland, ‘Abgenöthigter Nachtrag’ (see note 10 above), pp. 163f.
of English literature is that it lies outside the English literary tradition: ‘It is, rather, an early attempt at a novel in English by an Irish writer: a novel founded on anecdote, one which exploits a rich and rewarding seam of fantasy and which, in addition, throws some light on the origins of Irish fiction.’\textsuperscript{34} According to Ross, its ancestry is to be found not so much in earlier fiction by English authors as in the Irish seanchas, in the oral tradition of fantastic storytelling in which the narrator insists on the story’s truth. This interpretation has much to recommend it, because Buncle is indeed a compulsive raconteur, his stories are usually fantastic, he insists on their complete veracity, and the flimsiness and—quite literally—rambling nature of the plot are just what one might expect if its function were merely to link a series of anecdotes loosely together. But not even this reading is entirely satisfactory, because the greater part of Buncle’s narrative does not consist of anecdotes at all—or indeed of any other mode of fiction—but of a succession of learned harangues and disquisitions (including self-contained written treatises) on theology, ethics, and numerous different subjects, sometimes attributed to other characters whom Buncle encounters, and often embodying lengthy inventories of facts, from chemical formulae and medical bibliographies to episodes in Church history. As one editor of the novel puts it, ‘It is, in fact, such a paradox of a book that it tempts one to fly into paradoxes.’\textsuperscript{35}

It may therefore be possible to understand why some critics have dismissed this strange composition as totally absurd, or even as the product of a deranged mind. Thus the anonymous notice in the \textit{Critical Review} of 1766—the same year in which the \textit{Monthly Review} likened the author to Shakespeare and Richardson—consisted of the single sentence: ‘This is an irreviewable performance because the nonsense we encounter in perusing it, is insufferable.’\textsuperscript{36} Over a century later, the \textit{Dictionary of National Biography}, in its article on Amory, declared that some of the episodes in the novel ‘suggest the light-headed ramblings of delirium’, and added ‘Amory was clearly disordered in his intellect’.

Whichever way one looks at it, \textit{The Life of John Buncle, Esq.} is a strange and anomalous production. It is of an indeterminate and composite

\textsuperscript{35} Baker, Introduction, p. vi.
genre, and it is difficult to see why many of its parts were included at all; it is repetitive and digressive, and most of its dialogues are really monologues of the hero to which his collocutors meekly listen and assent; the learned discourses are long-winded and derivative, and often shallow and platitudinous; the plot is fantastic and incredible; and the whole composition, as Wieland remarked, is lacking in coherence. It is, in fact, a kind of literary montage in which the degree of unity prescribed by the classicistic poetics of its time, and encountered in the vast majority of novels until the fictional experiments of modernism, is altogether absent. Such unity as it does possess lies in the personality of its hero and narrator, in whose mind and life-history the disparate elements of the work converge. But since the hero’s personality is itself riven by a fundamental contradiction which is neither resolved nor relativised by any higher authorial perspective, even this unity is fragile and imperfect.

Despite all those moral shortcomings to which Wieland took such exception, there is nevertheless a positive quality about John Buncle which is central to the work’s appeal. There is something engaging, even wholesome, about his unflagging zest for life and that boundless self-confidence which enables him to ignore the contradictions in his own personality. He is never malicious, he is simply led by his passions; and his pedantic attempts to assert his moral disinterestedness while constantly betraying his real and far from disinterested motives are not without their involuntary humour. He is, for all his intellectual pretensions and theological learning, basically naïve. He lives by his impulses—especially his sexual impulses—and imagination, and most of his intellectual effort is aimed at justifying and sanctifying their promptings. He is also filled with a naïve curiosity and eagerness to learn about all manner of subjects; but despite his five years at Trinity College, this curiosity is marked by the indiscriminate zeal and arbitrary enthusiasms of an untrained mind.37

What, then, did the controversy between Nicolai and Wieland contribute to the understanding of Amory’s novel? The answer must be: very little indeed. Nicolai presented it as an edifying work of moral

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37 It is worth mentioning that there is apparently no record of Amory himself having studied at Trinity College (see Ross, ‘Thomas Amory […],’ p. 73) or, for that matter, at any other university.
realism in the autobiographical mode, and tried to relate it, not very convincingly, to the mainstream of English literature. Wieland, in his entertaining polemic, had no difficulty in refuting these claims, and presented it instead as a mixture of literary trash and moral humbug. Both of these approaches, however, miss the true source of the work’s appeal, because they take the hero—and particularly his ideological protestations—much too seriously. The kind of criteria which Nicolai and Wieland apply are simply not appropriate to one who ends his preface (written by Amory in the persona of Buncle) with the following valediction to the literary critics: ‘I have only to add, that I wish you all happiness; that your heads may lack no ointment, and your garments be always white and odoriferous’ (I, viii). One of these critics has since concluded that Amory’s novel is ‘impossible to understand [...] outside of an Irish context’. This may well be so; and if it is, there could clearly be little hope for either Nicolai or Wieland, both of whom were German and knew virtually nothing of Ireland or Irish culture. One may not have to be Irish oneself, of course, in order to appreciate Amory’s writings—but it probably helps.
