Chapter 2

The Work of the Register Office

I

In February 1751, Christopher Smart, writing as “Mary Midnight,” took credit for predicting the success of an institution opened a year earlier by the half brothers Henry and John Fielding. Noting that her “sedulous Application to the useful Science of Astrology” allowed her to determine “whenever a lucky Coincidence of propitious Symptoms attends the Birth of anything,” Midnight wrote that she “foresaw from the favourable Appearances, which attended the Birth of an Office some time since erected opposite Cecil-street in the Strand, under the Title of the UNIVERSAL REGISTER OFFICE” that such an institution would prosper. Indeed, the Universal, “agreeable to the foreboding of my Art, I find by the general Approbation of the Publick and Countenance of the People of Fashion, to have already in great Measure answer’d, and to be every Day more and more likely to answer its extensive Design, and the Purpose of Publick Good.”

The rhetoric of Smart’s astrological fiction humorously encodes the structural problem that brought the register office into being, at least as Henry Fielding imagined it. The chancy odds of “a lucky Coincidence of propitious Symptoms” attending “the Birth of anything” dramatizes in the planets the unfortunate state of sublunary economic affairs in which, as Fielding sees it, lucky coincidence too often fails to effect mutually beneficial communication and transaction: “In large and populous Cities, and wide and extended Communities, it is more probable that every human Talent is dispersed somewhere or other among the Members; and consequently every Person who stands in Need of the Talent, might supply his Want if he knew where to find it; but to know this is the Difficulty, and this Difficulty still encreases with the Largeness of the Society.” In the rational practice of the register office, however, dependence on luck was to
become obsolete, and the missed connections and inefficiencies that characterize more traditional venues for meeting and commerce ("Fairs, Markets, Exchanges") were to be eliminated: "Here the Buyer and the Seller, the Master and the Scholar, the Master and the Apprentice, and the Master and the Servant are sure to meet: Here ingenious Persons of all Kinds will meet with those ready to employ them, and the Curious will be supplied with everything which it is in the Power of Art to produce."3

On the surface, then, the relationship between Smart’s tongue-in-cheek prediction in an entertainment journal and Fielding’s serious proposal in a prosaic pamphlet seems an inverted one: the midwife’s rhetoric of the occult ironically emblematizing all the unpredictability of worldly things that Fielding’s orderly practice proposes to rectify. Yet both predict with an air of almost otherworldly infallibility. Midnight assures the success of the Office; while Fielding assures the success of the work of the Office: employer and employee “are sure to meet”; the curious “will be supplied with everything.” Moreover, both imply that the work of their respective institutions will be not only salutary but entertaining. Fielding’s phrase, “The Curious will be supplied with every thing which it is in the Power of Art to produce” (my emphasis), could stand as a motto to Smart’s eclectic journal, which advertised itself as “Containing all the Wit, and all the Humour, and all the Learning, and all the Judgement, that has ever been, or ever will be inserted in all the other Magazine.”4 This odd congruence of universalizing impulses—one serious, the other comic—throws into high relief the ambiguous ambitions of Fielding’s project. For as Fielding himself would surely have recognized, there was something in the choice of the term “Universal” itself to designate the scope of the office that threatened to recall both the Duncean lunacy of totalizing projects and the brilliance of Augustan parodic entertainments based upon them. Indeed, Smart himself invoked this relationship in two later squibs in The Midwife. On June 29, 1751, Mary Midnight advertised her own plans to open (“at the Sign of the Mop Handle in Shoe-Lane”) a similar institution:

An Office for the IGNORANT

OR,

A Warehouse of Intelligence

Where Physicians may learn the true Practice of Physic, Divines the true Practice of Piety, and Lawyers the true Practice of Law. In a Word, Fumblers of all Faculties will be corroborated without Loss of Time.5

And later still, after the opening of The Old Woman’s Oratory, Mary Midnight proposed from her “Rostrum” that a “Thought-Warehouse or Opinion-Office, be erected in the most conspicuous and commodious Part of this City.”6