

[*The National Review*]

## A NOVELIST OF GUSTO: BEING SOME GOSSIP ON SMOLLETT

BY H. C. BIRON

FASHION is never more capricious than when it turns its attention to literature—authors come and go in favor. There seems to be only one fixed rule—the real thing always survives. An eclipse may be; but even a complete eclipse does not last long. Time is the only infallible critic. For some years Smollett has been in the shade, why, it is a little difficult to understand; certainly he is an easy target for the fastidious critic. The faults are all on the surface. His heroes rely on faith rather than works for their acceptance. Whether Peregrine Pickle or Roderick Random be the greater rascal would be a near-run thing.

Upon the physical charms of his heroines he dwells with an almost embarrassing particularity, and, indeed, with regard to both maintains the intimate domesticity of Mrs. Aphra Behn. His coarseness is certainly repellent, but at a time when all the early Georgian geniuses insist on this note at some point of their masterpieces it ought not to be an insuperable bar. One reads a gentle, almost lady-like analysis of life for two or three hundred blameless pages to be brought up suddenly by a gross incident or phrase, introduced with something of the aggressive air with which a curate smokes a pipe.

There is nothing of this about Smollett. His grossness, generally more indecent than immoral, is a sort

of careless habit of expression rather like the profanity of bargees, to which the author probably attached very little importance one way or the other. It is a question of manners more than morals—of treatment rather than subject—even if it be admitted that the manners are not particularly refined and the treatment rather heavy in hand.

Fielding is very fond of the incident of a grotesque fight. His books are full of them. Molly Segrim's battle in the churchyard is classic, but Fielding always treats the affair in an ironic spirit which relieves the brutality, and when Mrs. Partridge attacks her husband, poor Partridge acts only on the defensive, but when Count Fathom has a difference of opinion with his wife—whom incidentally he has treated disgracefully—'she lent him a box on the ear with such energy as made his eyes water, and he for his honor of manhood and sovereignty, having washed her face with a cup of tea, withdrew to a coffee-house in the neighborhood,' is Smollett's treatment of the incident, in the crude brutality of which one seems to detect a certain atmosphere of sympathy with Fathom.

It was a rude age—Smollett was no pale student—a choleric combative Scotchman who had had to fight a hard battle in a very rough school. His early experiences as a ship's doctor in the navy no doubt proved an admirable training in many ways, es-

pecially for a novelist of character, but whatever ingenuous art it taught, the sea of those days hardly tended to soften the manners. Essentially a fighter, his theory of life was the eternal traditions of the navy — whatever the force of the enemy, always attack; and in the joy of combat Smollett was not always very scrupulous in his methods. As Thackeray says of him: 'He fought endless literary battles and braved and wielded for years the cudgels of controversy. It was a hard and savage fight in those days and a niggard pay. He was oppressed by illness, age, narrow fortune; but his spirit was still resolute and his courage sturdy. The battle over, he could do justice to the enemy with whom he had been so fiercely engaged and give a not unfriendly grasp to the hand that had mauled him.'

The grandson of a Scotch judge, Smollett inherited little but an irritable disposition from both parents, and a sense of humor from his mother. In 1739 he availed himself of the fairest prospect Scotland affords her sons, and started on the high road to England, true to type, with the tragedy of *The Regicide*, and very little else, in his pocket. Of his journey to London the curious may read with considerable entertainment in the opening chapters of *Roderick Random*. As showing the changed condition of life it is not without interest to find two pages of that work devoted to denouncing the extortion of a landlord and the bill set out in full, in final evidence of the 'Knavery of the World':

	<i>s. d.</i>
To bread and beer . . . . .	6
To a fowl and sausage . . . . .	2 6
To four bottles quadrim . . . . .	2 0
To pie and tobacco . . . . .	7
To lodging . . . . .	2 0
To breakfast * . . . . .	1 0
	—
	8 7

Which does not strike one nowadays as so very excessive, especially when we read that quadrim is an excellent ale of the landlord's own brewing — a landlord who quotes Horace and affects a soul above pence, to add to his villainy — and Smollett, with all his faults, was no niggard.

In those days an author sought the help and favor of a patron, according to Dr. Johnson's famous definition, one after Smollett's own heart: 'A wretch who supports with insolence and is paid with flattery.' The first Lord Lyttleton, a peer of literary tastes, is approached, but proves dilatory and unsympathetic. The famous Garrick refused the tragedy, apparently with ample justification. Smollett, though defeated, bides his time, and in *Roderick Random*, nine years afterwards, tells us all about it. Fortunately, Smollett was never reduced to the straits of the gifted Mr. Melopoyne, who, when he meets Roderick Random in the Marchelsea, is reduced for clothing to a dirty rug tied about him with two pieces of list. Such is the reward for having written a tragedy which Roderick reads 'with vast pleasure, not a little amazed at the conduct of the managers who had rejected it.' So admirable a work was it, 'judged by the laws of Aristotle and Horace,' that its rejection was due, according to its unfortunate author, entirely to the perfidious conduct of Garrick thinly disguised as Marmozet, of whom he declares, 'Nothing could equal his hypocrisy but his avarice, which conquered the faculties of his soul so much that he scrupled not to be guilty of the meanest practice to gratify that sordid appetite.'

In vain does Roderick Random affect to defend him on the ground that his social reputation is inconsistent with such conduct. The pretense is not very convincing and is only too

obviously a device to give the outraged poet another chance, of which he avails himself at once. 'It is not for the qualities of his heart that this little parasite is invited to the tables of dukes and lords who hire extraordinary cooks for his entertainment — his avarice they see not, his ingratitude they feel not, his hypocrisy accommodates itself to their humors and is of consequence pleasing, but he is chiefly courted for his buffoonery, and will be admitted into the choicest parties of quality for his talent of mimicking Punch and his wife Joan, when a poet of the most exquisite genius [that is, the author of *The Regicide*] is not able to attract the least regard.'

In comparison with this Lord Lyttelton, if not 'paid with flattery,' is let off lightly as Lord Rattle and Sir Gosling Scrag, even if his ode to the memory of his wife is ridiculed by a burlesque ode on the love of a grandmother, a performance of which in later years its author was probably not very proud. Yet in his *History of England* Smollett writes of Garrick: 'The exhibitions of the stage were improved to the most exquisite entertainment by the talent and management of Garrick, who greatly surpassed all his predecessors of this and perhaps every other nation in his genius for acting. In the sweetness and variety of his tones, the irresistible magic of his eye, the fire and vivacity of his actions, the elegance of attitude, and the whole pathos of expression,' but then in the interval that distinguished actor had produced, and paid for well, Smollett's farce, *The Reprisals, or the Tars of Old England*. The truce is extended also to the peer, of whom we read in the same work: 'Candidates for literary fame appeared even in the higher sphere of life' as exemplified by 'the delicate taste, the polished muse, and the tender feelings of a Lyttelton.' The battle

is over and the not unfriendly hand held out.

So with his struggles as a doctor. He tries to establish a practice in Downing Street and then in Mayfair, and fails. One cannot picture Smollett as a fashionable physician. Among his many gifts a bedside manner was hardly included. In consequence in his books he pokes the most merciless fun at the medical profession. Another attempt is made at Bath with a like result, and he writes a pamphlet to prove that its famous waters are entirely useless for all medical purposes — internal or external. Smollett was a practical man. Religion's appeal to him was slight. Catholicism, he says somewhere, was to him ridiculous, a comedy; Calvinism a tragedy and detestable. His Christianity would always have found it difficult to love an enemy unless, indeed, he had drubbed him soundly first. Although he never made a success as a doctor, in some ways he was far ahead of his time. He had an enormous belief in cold water and fresh air, and may claim to have discovered sea bathing as a medical treatment.

But with Smollett, as with so many of his peculiar temperament, his bark was much worse than his bite. At heart a generous kindly man, who found it as hard to do an unkind thing as to say a civil one. In the midst of his strenuous work he was a devoted husband and best of fathers. What a charming picture one of his letters gives: 'Many a time do I stop my task and betake me to a game of romps with Betty while my wife looks on, smiling and longing in her heart to join in the sport.' Poor Betty, whose early death he never quite recovered. Like most Scotchmen he was a stanch friend, especially to those in need, but perhaps the best testimonial to the real character of the man is the fact that when broken in health and fortune he went on his

travels to the South of France, his servant, after twelve years' service, refused to leave him. There must be something inherently attractive in a man whose dependents love him. The real test is not whether a man is a hero to his valet, but how long he has managed to keep him.

Among his multifarious labors Smollett ran a kind of literary factory where he turned out every kind of production from a Universal History to a translation of Voltaire. To get through the work he kept an army of hack writers in constant work. There was nothing unusual in this, it was the age of Grub Street, but Smollett provided the agreeable novelty of entertaining them every Sunday to dinner at his house in Chelsea. A most entertaining account of the *ménage* will be found in *Humphry Clinker*: 'Every Sunday his house is open to all unfortunate brothers of the quill, whom he treats with beef, pudding, and potatoes, port, punch, and Calvert's Entire butt beer. He has fixed upon the first day of the week for the exercise of his hospitality because some of his guests could not enjoy it upon any other for reasons I need not explain. I was civilly received in a plain yet decent habitation which opened backward into a very pleasant garden kept in excellent order, and indeed I saw none of the outward sign of authorship either in the house or the landlord, who is one of those few writers of the age that stand upon their own foundation, without patronage and above dependence.' The account of the company which follows is one of the best examples of Smollett's fun, and with the famous party, after the manner of the 'antients' in *Peregrine Pickle*; remains as entertaining as anything in English literature. But even better than Smollett's conscious picture of himself is the unconscious.

Francis Barber, Dr. Johnson's black

servant, had the misfortune to be pressed on board the Stag frigate, Captain Angel. Smollett writes to Wilkes on his behalf: 'I am again your petitioner in behalf of that great Cham of literature, Samuel Johnson. . . . Our lexicographer is in great distress; he says the boy is a sickly lad, of a delicate frame, and particularly subject to a malady in his throat which renders him very unfit for His Majesty's Service. You know what matter of animosity the said Johnson has against you, and I dare say you desire no other opportunity of resenting it than of laying him under an obligation.' There spoke the real man, and through Wilkes's influence Barber was restored to a service for which he was better adapted than His Majesty's. An odd, agreeable incident, which shows at one in kindness of heart three very different men.

After the failure of the tragedy, for a time Smollett abandoned literature, and taking a position of surgeon in the navy sailed in the squadron under Sir Chaloner Ogle. He was present during the whole of the operations against Carthage in 1741, and remained in the navy until 1744. They were four momentous years. It was then that Smollett gained that intimate knowledge of the English sailor to which we owe Morgan and Bowling, Hatchway and Trunnion, and it was on his way home that he met at Jamaica the beautiful Miss Lascelles, to whom he was so happily married. Nancy Lascelles, as the daughter of a planter, should have been an heiress, but something went wrong with her fortune. This was of little account to a man of Smollett's spirit. Upon his return, for some time he hesitated between medicine and literature, and it was not until in 1748 he published *Roderick Random*, and his genius found its real expression. The book had an immediate success. The knowledge of life, sense of char-

acter and consistent succession of humorous scenes and incidents appealed directly to the public, in spite of its underlying bitterness of tone. It is the work of a proud, sensitive man smarting under a sense of failure, and even worse — the successes of many he felt with justice his inferiors.

*Peregrine Pickle* followed in 1751, and at once there is apparent a more genial atmosphere. If *Peregrine* — ‘the savage and ferocious Pickle,’ as Scott calls him — is no great advance as an hero upon Roderick, the society at the garrison strikes a much more human note. It’s true the practical joke is still the basis of a good deal of the humor. It is a little startling to find a plot to marry the unfortunate Commodore to the repulsive Miss Grizzle treated as excellent fun, especially when engineered and carried to a successful end by the two people who profess the greatest affection for their victim. But there is real pathos in the scene of Trunnion’s death, and what sailor could wish a finer epitaph than Hatchway’s on his old friend: ‘Well fare thy soul, old Hawser Trunnion, man and boy I have known thee these five-and-thirty years, and sure a truer heart never broke biscuit. Many a hard gale hast thou weathered, but now thy spells are all over and thy hull fairly laid up. A better commander I’d never desire to serve, and who knows but I may help to set up thy standing rigging in another world.’ After *Peregrine Pickle* Smollett established himself at his house in Chelsea, which was his home for twenty years.

Except to a criminologist *Ferdinand Count Fathom* is a dull book. Smollett falls into the vulgar error that crime is amusing. The truth is, as a rule, a villain is a dull dog. The idea that criminals are a dashing, fascinating crew is the poorest cant of the penny dreadful. Only stupid people commit crimes; no

one turns to the road if he has contrivance enough to make an honest living. There is no duller reading than the *Newgate Calendar*. Cassanova himself after a volume or two becomes a bore. If one took the lives of twelve saints I venture to think they would provide much more entertainment than the same number of sinners, however desperate. Even Fielding made a tedious affair of *Jonathan Wild*, despite its irony.

At Chelsea all the time a vast output went on. Histories, voyages, compendiums of information, were poured upon the town. Smollett, who in his original preface to *Roderick Random* admitted his indebtedness to Gil Blas, among other ventures translated *Don Quixote*, and the task no doubt suggested Sir Launcelot Greaves, a knight-errant in an English setting. In addition to his other labors he became editor of the *Critical Review*, and here his combativeness got him into serious trouble. It appears that Admiral Knowles’s conduct on the occasion of the Rochfort Expedition was the subject of comment, which in the *Critical Review* took this form: ‘He is,’ said Smollett, ‘an admiral without conduct, an engineer without knowledge, an officer without resolution, and a man without veracity.’ A vigorous piece of writing which cost its author three months’ imprisonment and a fine of one hundred pounds. He next started the *Briton Magazine*, a hopeless attempt to make Lord Bute popular. Its only practical result was to involve Smollett in a quarrel with Wilkes, whose retaliatory *North Briton* carried heavier metal. A series of misfortunes followed. Lord Bute threw him over, poor Betty died, his finances became affected, and in 1763 he shut up his Chelsea establishment, and ‘traded by malice, persecuted by faction, abandoned by false patrons, and over-

whelmed with a sense of a domestic calamity,' he sought mental and physical relief in foreign travel.

During the two years' absence he wrote letters to his various friends, which form his *Travels through France and Italy*, one of the few books of travel that have proved of permanent interest. A pioneer can always get an audience; it takes a writer to keep it. Smollett was both, for the author of *Roderick Random* and *Peregrine Pickle* may fairly claim to have discovered the Riviera. In another classic of travel Sterne describes our author. 'The learned Smelfungus traveled from Boulogne to Paris, from Paris to Rome, and so on, but he set out with the spleen and the jaundice. He wrote an account of them, but it was nothing but the account of his miserable feelings.' And again:

'I popped upon Smelfungus again at Turin in his return home, and a sad tale of sorrowful adventures he had to tell, wherein he had been flayed alive and beheaded and used worse than St. Bartholomew at every stage he had come at.—"I'll tell it," cried Smelfungus, "to the world."—"You had better tell it," said I, "to your physician."' There was a tragic truth in this, more perhaps than Sterne guessed. The poor traveler, although he refused to admit it, had already developed the seeds of consumption which eventually killed him. Arriving at Boulogne in August with a bad cold, to the amazement of the natives he went in for a course of sea bathing. 'By this desperate remedy got a fresh cold in my head, but my stitches and fever vanished the very first day, and by a daily repetition of the bath I have diminished my cough, strengthened my body, and recovered my spirits.'

Smollett was not an easy traveler; he had one great disqualification common to generous natures — a hatred

of being swindled — and found the bills even worse than Roderick Random's. The customs officials who held up his library of books were 'vermin,' a classification which alone should endear him to travelers everywhere and always. His ultimate destination was Nice, but he traveled by Montpellier, at that time the most famous health resort in Europe, in order to see the antiquities around Nimes and Anjou, and to try how far the climate suited his ailment. On the way he engages Joseph, his coachman, who turns out to have been a member of a gang of brigands headed by one Maudrin — the Dick Turpin of eighteenth-century France. Joseph, in fact, had only been pardoned in consideration of his performing upon Maudrin the office of executioner. However, Joseph proved 'very obliging and submissive,' and at once became, like all Smollett's dependents, devoted to his master, so much so, that on Smollett's return eighteen months later, the amiable brigand, on seeing him again, 'shed tears of joy.' At Montpellier practised the great lung specialist of the day, Dr. Fyves. Smollett, ever suspicious of the faculty, submits a statement of his case in Latin, and the doctor declares that he has tubercles in the lungs. It was only too true, but Smollett will not admit the truth, ridicules the poor professor, and pushes on for Nice.

If he had no other title to fame, Smollett discovered the Riviera. 'Winter in all his rigor reigning on one side of the house and summer in all her glory on the other,' still describes its climate. He stays the night at Cannes, 'a little fishing town, agreeably situated on the beach of the sea'; and so to Nice. The poor invalid is enraptured with the beauty of the scene. 'When I stand upon the rampart and look round me, I can scarce help thinking myself enchanted.' Those who sneer at Smol-

lett as a Goth, insensible to beauty of all kinds, should read his appreciation and admirable description of the beauties, architectural and natural, of Southern France. Even in the eighteenth century the trade in flowers was in full vogue. 'Presents of carnations are sent from hence in the winter to Turin and Paris, nay, sometimes as far as London, by the post. They are [and still are] packed up in a wooden box without any sort of preparation, one pressed upon another; the person who receives them cuts off a little bit of the stalk, and steeps them for two hours in vinegar and water, when they recover their full bloom and beauty.' Those who grumble at the cost of a railway ticket to the south must remember that in September, 1764, 'the journey from Calais to Nice of four persons in a coach, or two post-chaises, with a servant on horseback traveling post, may be performed with care for about one hundred and twenty pounds, including every expense.'

At Nice he continued the sea bathing. 'The people here were very surprised when I began to bathe in the middle of May; they thought it very strange that a man seemingly presumptuous should plunge into the sea, especially when the weather was so cold, and some of the doctors prognosticated immediate death; but when it was perceived that I grew better in consequence of the bath, some of the Swiss officers tried the same experiment, and in a few days our example was followed by several inhabitants of Nice.' The climate delights him, but it is gratifying to learn that even in the eighteenth century 'the seasons seem more irregular than formerly.' The Gothic view of Smollett is largely due to Sterne, who accuses him of speaking disrespectfully of the Pantheon. "'T is nothing but a huge cockpit," said he. — "I wish you had said nothing worse

of the Venus of Medici," replied I.' It is a most unfair attack. 'I had a most eager curiosity to see the antiquities of Florence and Rome. I longed impatiently to view those wonderful edifices, statues, and pictures which I had so often admired in prints and descriptions. I felt an enthusiastic ardor to tread that very classical ground, which had been the scene of so many great achievements,' is hardly the language of a Philistine. It is true he was not merely a critic, but an independent critic. He did not like Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, and said so, in which he joined hands with a later novelist, Wilkie Collins. But in saying of Raphael's art, 'He has the serenity of Virgil, but wants the fire of Homer,' he adds to the felicity of phrase a nice perception of artistic values.

If he did not like the Pantheon he did full justice to the Castle of St. Angelo, St. Peter's, the Coliseum, and the baths of Caracalla. And after all, complain as Sterne did of his usage of the Venus, poor Smollett is most apologetic to the lady. 'I believe I ought to be entirely silent, or at least conceal my real sentiments, which will otherwise appear equally absurd and presumptuous. It must be want of taste that prevents my feeling that enthusiastic admiration with which others are inspired.' All he did say was, 'I cannot help thinking that there is no beauty in the features of the Venus, and that the attitude is awkward and out of character.' In June, 1765, the traveler returned to his native land, writing, 'I love it still more tenderly as the scene of all my interesting connections, as the habitation of my friends, for whose conversation, correspondence, and esteem I wish alone to live.' His health was undoubtedly improved. To show, as it were, that there was still life in the old dog, he writes *The Adventures of an Atom*, in which he, refreshed by travel,

runs genially amuck among patrons, politicians, and the public life of the day. But the strain of work began again to try his constitution, but not before he had completed, while the southern sun still lingered in his bones, his greatest book, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, which Thackeray described as 'the most laughable story that has ever been written since the goodly art of novel writing began.'

It was probably his letters from the south that suggested the epistolary form in which it is written. Tedious as that method is for the exposition of a story, Smollett saw what an admirable opportunity it gave a humorist. The different points of view with which the same incidents are seen and recorded by the varying characters make an ever-changing feast of fun. In *Humphry Clinker*, Smollett found himself at last, and quite unconsciously the splenetic fighter merges into the genial humorist, Matthew Bramble. But the end was near. Poor Smollett never lived to enjoy the success of *Humphry Clinker*. In 1770 he was driven again abroad by his health, and this time started upon a journey longer than he had anticipated.

To anyone fond of reading a bad memory is a great asset. It is about the equivalent of a moderately stocked library. One turns back to the old books with an ever-fresh enjoyment. Sometimes, it is true, to be disappointed. The masterpieces of our boyhood are not always quite as good as we thought, but others turn out surprisingly better. Smollett certainly does not disappoint.

His style, if not in the least literary, is certainly literature, direct, pointed, and economic. His words tell and are always the right ones. In times of peace and prosperity the reflective and philosophical appeals. Gentle problems for armchair solution wile away the pleasant Sunday afternoons of the well-to-do. In times of stress and struggle we turn to the simpler stories of life and character.

When Carlyle wanted to forget the destruction of the French Revolution he read the admirable works of Captain Marryat. So Smollett's turn may come. As long as humor and characterization attract, *Humphry Clinker* will be sure of an audience, and Tabitha Bramble, Winifred Jenkins, and Lis-mahago continue to delight us. One thing is undoubtedly true of Smollett. No one who ever wrote has had so great and abiding influence on future novelists. Dickens's debt to him was immense. Actual incidents he reproduces. Sam Weller's joining Mr. Pickwick in the Fleet is merely Peregrine Pickle and Hatchway and Pipes over again, and among 'the glorious host' that came out of the 'blessed little room' upstairs to console David Copperfield's childhood by their grateful company, Dickens does not forget to include Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, and Humphry Clinker.

To the suggestive genius of Tobias Smollett, Fanny Burney, Walter Scott, Marryat, and Charles Lever all owe, not in the sense of plagiarism but of inspiration, a debt they would never have repudiated.

[*The Spectator*]

## THE NEW COLUMBUS

BY R. H. LAW

Amid the booths and shows,  
Full in the naphtha-glare,  
Mad Christopher arose,  
The prophet of the fair.

Wild-eyed and beetle-browed,  
A figure gaunt and pale,  
Before the jeering crowd  
He told his wonder-tale.

'A traveler I have been  
To a world beyond your view,  
A world where grass is green  
And skies are often blue;

'A rainbow-colored land  
Where purple clouds I saw,  
Seashores of ruddy sand  
And yellow corn and straw.

'How steadfast were those hills!  
How firm the level plain!  
What movement in the rills!  
How plashed the thunder-rain!

'A river there I know  
That glitters in the light;  
All day its waters flow  
Nor rest they in the night.

'Small skylarks in that air  
Sing high on feathered wings;  
Even buttercups are there  
And daisies common things.

'There if you struck a bell  
It always gave a sound;  
And, if an apple fell,  
It fell upon the ground.

'Their moon it floated free,  
Their stars would seldom fall;  
How might such marvels be,  
Or things be there at all?

'Of men in cap and gown  
I asked the reason why;  
But, though they talked me down,  
They knew no more than I.'

Here ceased the madman's word,  
So loud their laughter grew;  
His tale was too absurd  
For them to hear it through.

## ROMNEY MARSH

BY W. B. NICHOLS

Here once the moon her legendary tides  
Led in reiterate phalanx o'er the  
roods

Of marsh, where dragonish and finny  
broods

Wallowed, and glimmering mackerel  
lipped their sides;

Here now the sun abides, and grass  
abides,

And lambs browse on the soundless  
solitudes,

While, far-off, roaring through the  
year's four moods,

Old, excommunicate ocean rides and  
chides.

So from time's sea, and virgin to the  
stars,

Is here and there won by the spirit  
of man

A green eternal pasture — as when  
first

The cataclysmic heart of nature  
burst

Asunder in fire, and life's æonian wars  
Of aspiration toward a God began.

[*Coterie*]

## MERLIN

BY T. W. EARP

Merlin the wise and good,  
The counselor of kings,  
Has gone out to the wood  
And in cracked voice sings;

Because a maid has caught him  
That had all the world's lore,  
And love's new learning taught him  
That never loved before.

He droops his old, thin hands  
To dabble in the pool,  
And laughs, and understands,  
And knows the world a fool.