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TOBIAS SMOLLETT
HUMPHRY CLINKER

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THE EXPEDITION OF HUMPHRY CLINKER

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TOBIAS SMOLLETT

THE EXPEDITION OF HUMPHRY CLINKER

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY ANGUS ROSS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

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First published in 1771
Published in Penguin English Library 1967
Reprinted 1971, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1978

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Made and printed in Great Britain
by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd,
Bungay, Suffolk
Set in Monotype Fournier

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INTRODUCTION

Humphry Clinker has been regarded almost unanimously as Smollett's best work ever since it first appeared in 1771. Many critics have praised its good humour, its relaxed air, its more or less detached observation. All these things are true enough in their way, but the reason for this praise is curious and also obscures some of the qualities which have kept the book alive and which make it truly original. What is seized on is the contrast with Smollett's other novels, and the violent contrast with traits often shown in his turbulent career. The criticism of *Humphry Clinker*, in short, has been mainly biographical, in terms of Smollett's own life; and, of course, what a life that was! Damned if he does, and damned if he doesn't, Smollett's career as a novelist does not square with the official role of a major writer. He was a moralist, whose idealism frequently took the shape of intemperate, even manic, abuse and libel; he was once imprisoned and heavily fined. On the other hand, as a novelist he was not so much interested in the inner life as in man's fate as a public actor. Compare Smollett's reputation with that of Fielding and Richardson. Fielding as a moralist appealed to the readers of his own age, and as a well-balanced, comic novelist was also highly valued in the nineteenth century. His middle-of-the-road judgement, reason neatly balanced by feeling, seemed sure-footed; in addition, he is now admired for the complexity and power of his comic structures, his technique. Richardson's reputation sank in the nineteenth century, because his kind of psychological probing seemed unpleasant, dangerous, or unconvincing; besides a sentimental tradesman does not have the face of a great writer. He has, however, been gradually rehabilitated, precisely because of his interior dramas. Smollett in contrast has lost all round, except that in *Humphry Clinker* he turns out not to be so eccentric and prickly after all.

A nose for eccentricity and the power of raw sensitivity, though, are the sources of Smollett's most successful art.

There is, of course, a very direct connexion between the book and Smollett's life. He always used straight autobiographical

reminiscence and even self-justification in his fiction. Also, as a thrifty professional writer, he incorporated a good deal from his various journalistic and historical compilations. This is the chatty information relished by Hazlitt and others, and it is a real part of the book's attraction and success. (Some attempt has been made in brief form in the notes to explain this.) Writers, in fact, have frequently used *Humphry Clinker* as a kind of quarry to dig out information about Smollett's last years, but this, as we shall see, hardly does it justice as a novel.

Smollett possibly wrote *Humphry Clinker* intermittently from 1768 to 1770, and probably completed it while he was staying at his villa in the mountains near Leghorn, where he had retired in a vain attempt to regain his health. The novel appeared in three small volumes in 1771, the year of his death. Much of the raw observation in the novel, the historical, political, social, and literary contexts of the ideas, the obvious autobiographical references, can be elucidated by a study of Smollett's life.* The bric-à-brac makes pleasant reading and is an interesting picture of eighteenth-century society. The way Smollett puts it together, though, and fashions from it a work of art that has a claim to originality, is another matter.

Smollett was born in March 1721 at Dalquhurn in Dunbartonshire. He claimed descent from a local family of importance, but after study at the local schools and at the University of Glasgow, he was apprenticed to a surgeon in that city. Thus his national and economic circumstances forced him to go out into the world to make his own way. Some of the rancour which blazes up in Smollett's intellectual and literary controversies comes from a consciousness that in the shabby courts of Grub Street, he has become *déclassé*. This may strengthen the emphasis placed in his last book on the nature of experience and its effect on human conduct, and it undoubtedly helps to produce the positive side to Smollett's idealism: an acceptance of the ordered ranks of society, backed by knowledge of many classes.

* See L. M. Knapp, 'Smollett's Self Portrait in *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*' in F. W. Hilles (editor), *The Age of Johnson* (1949; reprinted 1964 as a Yale paperback).

He set out for London in 1739, with a mediocre tragedy on a Scottish historical theme, *The Regicide*, in his pocket. He never did manage to get this staged. This failure in one of the orthodox literary activities, at the outset of his career, plagued him for a long time. As was his habit, he took the matter personally and saw in the situation the result of spiteful enmity. In 1741 he shipped as a surgeon's mate in H.M.S. *Chichester*, which sailed with Ogle's West Indies squadron. He was present at the débâcle at Cartagena, and for some years lived in Jamaica, where he married. He returned to London in 1744 to practise (unsuccessfully) as a doctor. His attitude to violence, one of fascination and repulsion, comes from the life he led, and the realistic reportage in his fiction, as in the bitter passages on naval life in *Roderick Random*, is well supported by exotic personal experience. In *Humphry Clinker*, the valetudinarian complaints of Matthew Bramble are given good speculative backing; the comments on Bath also spring from an awareness of medical controversy and theory. Smollett does not merely use fag-ends of information from his past, but makes Bramble's feeling and intelligent reaction to what he sees illuminate an area (of ageing, of human suffering, of filth and compassion) in which feeling and reason, habit and ignorance are permitted their struggle. Sterne's 'learned Smelfungus' had his own idealistic purposes in rehearsing medical knowledge and disagreeables.

Smollett wrote much as a journalist, translator, and hack-writer, and the qualities that enabled him to succeed in Grub Street – spite, opportunism, particularity, and energy – are also characteristic of his fiction, which grew out of his other writing. These qualities, too, the excesses of which caused him much trouble, shame, and even imprisonment, prevent him from excelling in some of the arts now admired in fiction. He seldom thoroughly works out any of his conceptions; he is apt, by perfunctory turns, to leave the reader dangling; his jokes and references are sometimes too obscure and rooted in his own affairs. He is also apt to be long-winded on occasion. Liveliness and rough humour are sometimes used as substitutes for formal structure.

The Adventures of Roderick Random, Smollett's first novel, appeared in 1748. This is a series of picaresque adventures, connected by the travels of a young, partly autobiographical, Scottish

hero. The exposé of London life foreshadows one of the themes of *Humphry Clinker*, but the tenor of the book is much more satirical and less reflective. He translated, or superintended the translation of, *Gil Blas* (1749) and *Don Quixote* (1755), so that the loose structure of his next novel, *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751), is deliberate rather than ignorant. *Peregrine Pickle* contains, in Commodore Hawser Trunnion, an important example of Smollett's art of fantasticated, non-realistic caricature. Successful trends in modern fiction have shown that Smollett is a more sophisticated worker in this fashion than was sometimes allowed. *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1755) pioneered the Gothick horrors which became popular later in the century, and *The Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves*, first published serially in Smollett's periodical *The British Magazine* during 1760–61, is a clumsy version of a Don Quixote story.

One of Smollett's liveliest works is his *Travels Through France and Italy*, which appeared in 1766. This form of writing had gained great popularity as the English reading public extended its interest in society and manners from tales of exotic lands and unknown continents, to accounts of things in Europe and in Britain itself. In the prefatory epistle by 'Henry Davis' Smollett jocularly hooks *Humphry Clinker* on to this bandwagon (see p. 29). But the novel also stresses the observation, the judgement, and the conclusions that a travel book might excite by discussing manners, customs, men, and nature. Ten years earlier, Smollett, as one of his compilations, had printed seven volumes of *A Compendium of Authentic and Entertaining Voyages*. Many of the popular travel books of the day were compiled as series of letters, so *Humphry Clinker*, which is also put together in that fashion, is less original in one way than it may seem now.

Another taste of his age, which as a man living by his pen Smollett had to consider and please, was for history. From 1760 to 1761 appeared his long-popular compilation, *A Complete History of England*. This was often printed with David Hume's *History*, and although a more hurried work than the philosopher's, it too had pretensions to being an exercise in reflective writing. The reflections were, of course, large political. Just as he ranges spatially through Great Britain and Europe in search of social and

moral conclusions, Smollett also examined the history of his own society to provide maxims and opinions valid in any consideration of contemporary affairs. In 1762 he edited a weekly called *The Briton* in support of the administration of the very unpopular Scottish favourite, Lord Bute (see Note 66). This, as did much of his political writing, landed him in violent controversy, in which he was trounced by his friend John Wilkes, who produced the rival *North Briton*. In 1766, just before starting on *Humphry Clinker*, he printed the anonymous *History and Adventures of an Atom*, a violently satirical attack on George II and leading politicians of all descriptions, idealistically denouncing them for corruption, lack of principle, lack of intelligence, and lack of feeling. These historical and political preoccupations appear in *Humphry Clinker*, in the portrait of Newcastle, the account of London life, the historical opinions of Lismahago, and so on. But there the material is related to the informing spirit of the book. The opinions of Bramble and Jery are Smollett's idealism and criticism harnessed and qualified by imaginative distance. The opinions, judgements, doctrines are not digressions in a story, excrescences, obsessions of Smollett. They are part of what the book is about.

The story of *Humphry Clinker* is simple. A family from Wales, a well-to-do landowner, with his nephew and niece who are also his wards, his elderly unmarried sister, a maid-servant, and a man-servant he acquires by the way go on a ramble. From April to October, they travel by way of Gloucester, Bristol, Bath, London, through Yorkshire to Edinburgh, up to Argyleshire and the fringe of the Highlands; back by Glasgow, Carlisle, and Manchester, to the English country house of friends, whence they will return to Wales. The dramatic action is deliberately slight and stagey: an intrigue on the part of the niece turns out happily in the end; the landowner helps a friend put his estate in order; the nephew marries the daughter of another friend, who is also the father of the niece's lover; the man-servant is recognized as the landowner's bastard son; the landowner's sister, despite her age, marries a super-annuated soldier. Sundry farcical adventures and practical jokes, a taste for which Smollett shared with many of his contemporaries, are woven in. Simple and incredible. The point of

the book is clearly not the story. This is underlined, even, by the huddle of events at the end. The throw-away conclusion is deliberate, not carelessness on the author's part. 'Every day is now big with incident and discovery', writes the nephew; and later, 'The comedy is near a close; and the curtain is ready to drop'. Attention is drawn to the artifice, the 'axidents, surprisals and terrifications'.

The narration is slightly more complex. It is carried on in eighty-two letters. Twenty-seven are written by the landowner; twenty-eight by his nephew; eleven by his niece; ten by the maid-servant; and five by his sister. (There is also a letter from the niece's suitor.) These letters overlap, giving two or three accounts of some incidents. In this way different points of view are developed. This is not the main design of the novel, and the possibilities of this technique, like many other experiments in Smollett's fiction, are really only sketched out, rather than thoroughly exploited. Half the book is taken up with the nephew's letters to a college chum; slightly under half by the landowner's letters to his physician and close friend. The main sensibility of the novel is the landowner, but the title of it is given by the servant picked up by the way, who doesn't appear until the twenty-eighth letter, and does not take a great part in the action. Another very considerable figure, the elderly sister's suitor, never writes a letter, and appears only in the forty-eighth letter, and thereafter intermittently.

If the deliberately skeletal story and the oddly arranged narration are put together, the conclusion is not that Smollett is improvising a haphazard, sunset, autobiographical novel, but that he is creating something that demands fairly close attention for itself.

It is obvious that Matthew Bramble has much in common with Smollett. Bramble is elderly, valetudinarian, and irascible. His heart and mind are often at odds: he is generous but suspicious; tender but sarcastic; humane but belligerent. His public conduct often lands him in trouble. His actions spring from the defence and protection of his very tender feelings; his feelings betray his rational prudence. Smollett shows this paradox by Bramble's commentary in his own letters. He is given his niece Lydia's innocent and stagey intrigue, his nephew Jery's conduct and Clinker's adventures to discuss. He also provides the general description and comment proper to writers of travel letters; he is an admirer of natural

beauty, scenery, and cultivation. It is noticeable, however, that the boy and girl who accompany him are his wards, not his children. This enhances the comedy of Bramble's humours, by removing the possibility of tragedy; the deepest springs of personal feeling are not directly admitted.

The paradox of Bramble's life is also the subject of some of the letters. He is accompanied by a young observer, his adventurous, rash nephew, Jery, who is also articulate and 'witty'. Writing to his college friend, he provides the most connected and elaborate letters. His point of view is at times callow, inexperienced, and flippant, but he is also generous and friendly. He laughs at, but admires, his uncle:

> His singularities afford a rich mine of entertainment; his understanding, so far as I can judge, is well cultivated; his observations on life are equally just, pertinent and uncommon. He affects misanthropy, in order to conceal the sensibility of a heart, which is tender, even to a degree of weakness... I can't help being sometimes diverted by his little distresses.
>
> (Jery: 24 April)

Bramble is flanked by two grotesques, caricatures from the same gallery as Bowling in *Roderick Random* and Commodore Trunnion in *Peregrine Pickle*. Clinker, the young servant, and Lismahago, the old soldier, never write letters, but are discussed by Jery and the squire at some length. At his first introduction, Clinker is described as 'about twenty years of age, of a middling size, with bandy legs, stooping shoulders, high forehead, sandy locks, pinking eyes, flat nose, and long chin...', but a guinea and friendship metamorphose him into 'a smart fellow... remarkably assiduous' (Jery: 24 May). He 'turns out a great original', and by 10 July Jery is describing him as 'a surprising compound of genius and simplicity'. Clinker shadows the feeling side of Bramble, and indeed is so far the old man's *alter ego* as to be discovered as his natural son. Clinker's natural feeling is the test of feeling in others. When he first appears, without a shirt to cover his backside, Tabitha's lack of compassion towards him elicits a 'significant glance' from her brother; the publican's attitude provokes old Bramble's sarcastic epithet of 'a Christian of bowels', and on 2 June, Jery even recounts that Bramble's '*own withers were not*

altogether unwrung' by an honest remark by Clinker about swearing. The latter's feeling, though, is not an unqualified good thing. Thinking his master is drowning at Scarborough, a 'conceit' arising from the best of generous feelings, he hurts the old squire's ear and provokes his master's feeling – this time, however, 'an ebullition of his choler' – and earns a blow. There is a curious parallel later. Clinker rescues Bramble from a real danger of drowning; he

> began to breathe regularly, and soon retrieved his recollection. . . . As for Clinker, his brain seemed to be affected. – He laughed, and wept, and danced about in such a distracted manner. . . .
>
> (Jery: 8 October)

Compare an earlier demonstration of feeling at a 'pathetic recognition' when Bramble 'sobbed, and wept, and clapped his hands, and hollowed, and finally ran down into the street'.

Bramble is irascible; but no one is more irascible than Obadiah Lismahago. The gallant Lieutenant, by violent and severe adventures, poverty and circumstances, has been almost alienated from human feeling. He is, from the first, associated by Smollett with Quixote imagery:

> A tall, meagre figure, answering, with his horse, the description of Don Quixote mounted on Rozinante, appeared in the twilight at the inn door. . . .
>
> He forthwith leaped up in a fury, and snatching one of his pistols, threatened to put the ostler to death, when another squall from the women checked his resentment. He then bowed to the window, while he kissed the butt-end of his pistol. . . .
>
> As for his thighs, they were long and slender, like those of a grasshopper. . . .
>
> (Jery: 10 July)

Lismahago has had his argumentative powers honed to a fine edge by his national circumstances and personal misfortunes. He outargues Bramble. His arguments are paradoxical, but difficult to deal with:

> You must not imagine [writes Bramble of the lieutenant] that all these deductions were made on his part, without contradiction on mine. – No

– the truth is, I found myself piqued in point of honour, at his pretending to be so much wiser than his neighbours. – I questioned all his assertions, started innumerable objections, argued, and wrangled with uncommon perseverance, and grew very warm, and even violent, in the debate. – Sometimes he was puzzled, and once or twice, I think, fairly refuted; but from those falls he rose again like Antæus, with redoubled vigour, till at length I was tired, exhausted, and really did not know how to proceed, when luckily he dropped a hint, by which he discovered he had been bred to the law; a confession which enabled me to retire from the dispute with a good grace, as it could not be supposed that a man like me, who had been bred to nothing, should be able to cope with a veteran in his own profession. I believe, however, that I shall for some time continue to chew the cud of reflection upon many observations which this original discharged.

(Bramble: 15 July)

Bramble, it has been said, has much in common with Smollett; he may even be as has been suggested, a sort of wish-fulfilling figure for the author, but the situation is well under control. By means of the structure of the book, Smollett presents his own predilections and habits, the paradoxes of his own thought and feeling, with imagination and perspective. He puts the book together in such a way as to distance the squire's feelings, to surround them with qualification. Bramble is rational and wilful; but the past experiences of Clinker and Lismahago are more important in conditioning their feelings and actions than their wills, or calculations. Bramble is old and ripe with experience; this experience is bracketed by Clinker's youthful inexperienced pedantry, and Lismahago's crusty inflexibility – the pedantry of experience. So that Bramble–Smollett's experience is not treated without irony. Bramble is a personality, a man of humours: the burden of the non-personal is stressed in Clinker and Lismahago. Here lies one of the beauties of Smollett's art of caricature, much under-rated because it is not realistic. It is analytical within the structure of the book. This is one of the aspects of the art of fiction in which Dickens (among others) was a follower of Smollett.

It has often been pointed out that *Humphry Clinker* is related to the picaresque novel. But Clinker is a very peculiar *picaro*: not a rogue but a Methodist; not a successful manipulator but a man of feeling (though sometimes of ridiculous feeling). Smollett calls his

book *The Expedition*, not *Adventures* as in all his other fiction. This may only be a successful improvisation, a happy thought to make his book a satire on a common kind of writing – the travel narrative. It may be of more importance. If experience and environment, the part of life outside a man's control, are as important as the will, human arrangement, and exertion, then the notion of the *picaro* needed modification. Smollett, as a young man on the make, sees the successful 'adventurer' as a powerful idea. The old writer thinks it is a fraud. Smollett's book is only incidentally more mellow. It seeks to explore and illustrate a violent area of human life, the violent fisticuffs between thought and feeling. Experience doesn't really teach us; it sometimes makes us different.

Apparently gratuitous word-play is also pressed into service to this end. The past experience of Tabitha and Win Jenkins form part of what they see in the unfamiliar and the new. Their malapropisms suggest this. In the last letter in the book, the religious ideas and the sacrament of marriage are given physical, kitchen dress in Win's language: 'We were yesterday three kiple *chined*, by the *grease* of God, in the holy bands of *mattermoney*'. There is, of course, the sexual innuendo with which Smollett puts himself as author in the joke. But 'Providinch' and the 'comely pear' are different. Here Smollett's fun and inventiveness play a part in the structure of the book as a whole. Tabitha's life has strangled the free flow of her emotions. Smollett handles this comically, but he feels it. Her careful, even miserly, household management is ludicrously exploited, but again for a purpose. She is not just the spinster stereo-type; though she is partly caricature. Win Jenkins is assigned the simple role of the serving-wench in the 'action', but the structure of the book makes more of this.

The humours of Matthew Bramble are based on the paradox of human nature, the frequent cross-purposes of the head and the heart. Smollett distributes the parts in this comedy among a group of travellers. Their journey sets the personal human situation in a geographical and historical context, in the paradox of civilization. The hardships and deprivations of primitive life are eased by progress, but progress brings in its wake the corruptions of luxury and misused power. There is nothing startling or original in Smollett's