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Reviews

Robert Giddings. *The Tradition of Smollett*. London. Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1967. 215 pp. 42 shillings. New York. Barnes & Noble. \$7.50.

If the extremes of tradition criticism can be defined on the one side by the inclusiveness of Northrop Frye and on the other by F. R. Leavis, who insists there are "important distinctions to be made," then Robert Giddings belongs at the Leavis pole, if not beyond it. He justifies the harshness of a Smollett review by the greater severity to be found in *Scrutiny*, and he even speaks of "the great tradition" in which Smollett wrote, by which he means the picaresque tradition. But more basic is Giddings' notion that the way to describe a tradition is to purify it of all but a very few titles. When he is finished, we have only *Lazarillo de Tormes*, *Guzman d'Alfarache*, *Gil Blas*, *Meriton Latroon* (an inferior example), *Colonel Jack*, a few chapters from *Roderick Random*, and *Peregrine Pickle*, which he sees as both the high point and the dead end of the picaresque. "The relationship of German literature to the main stream of the picaresque tradition is not easy to see," and throughout the world, "after Smollett's death there was no single inheritor of his tradition."

Giddings is able to accomplish this reduction by regarding a tradition not as a developing organism but as a rigid pattern with its rules firmly established by its earliest examples. Thus *Felix Krull* does not belong because the true picaro "fights to get enough to eat," and *Barry Lyndon* is out because "genuine picaresque writing is always contemporary." Now everyone agrees that the term "picaresque" has been used so loosely as to have become almost meaningless, and one is glad to have standards, but Giddings' procedure is too easy and too arbitrary. Indeed, if he had read Robert Alter's *Rogue's Progress* (1964) and accepted some of its definitions—that "the picaroon . . . never substantially alters during the course of his experiences" and that he never considers "the possibility of rejecting society"—Giddings would have been forced to expunge even *Peregrine Pickle* from the Smollett tradition. But he is happily unaware of this "requirement." In fact, one of his reasons for disliking *Humphry Clinker* is his belief that Matthew Bramble does not change.

Moreover, even if the procedure were a sound one, it absolutely

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demands that the critic give evidence of having read all the important works which might conceivably belong to the tradition. This the chapter entitled "From *Humphry Clinker* to *The Sot Weed Factor*" clearly fails to do. When he leaves out *Huckleberry Finn* and *Augie March*, one wonders how much Giddings has read; one wonders how carefully he has read when he calls Bulwer Lytton's *Alice* a novel "of social comment" concerning "highwaymen, orphan boys or criminals"; or how intelligently, when he says that *Caleb Williams* is "an individual portrait of one wronged and ill-used boy who symbolizes nothing further."

On the positive side, *The Smollett Tradition* mounts a strenuous argument for the unity of *Peregrine Pickle*. The defense is valuable, although not nearly so original as the quotations and lack of quotations from other authorities would lead one to assume. Mr. Giddings is not being dishonest here; he simply does not know how to use critics with whom he agrees and cannot therefore dismiss with a flabby epithet. Nevertheless he makes a genuine contribution when he attempts to show that the prison scenes provide a thematic focus for all the episodes of the novel and convert it into a sort of *Bildungsroman* in which the hero's behavior "is symptomatic of a diseased society." The relaxation in standards which makes it possible for Giddings to argue that Smollett has *improved* on the "too episodic" nature of the early picaresque novels by bringing unity to the form is a welcome inconsistency. I find it impossible to agree that it is "not . . . pretentious" to compare the prison section in *Peregrine Pickle* with the heath scenes in *King Lear*, but a moment of such high enthusiasm is also a pleasant change in so generally negative a book.

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