"The Vortex of the Tumult": Order and Disorder in Humphry Clinker

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The various readings of Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*—as a comic romance, as a study of primitivism and progress, or as a satire on eighteenth-century life and scene, just to mention a few—have served only to reconfirm the vitality and variety of Smollett's comic inventiveness in his best and most popular work.\(^1\) Smollett's use of various imagery of heaven and hell, monsters, animals, and his frequent references to excrement and nudity, have also been examined, with interesting results.\(^2\) The novel's basic premise—Matthew Bramble's search of a "cure" to his mental and physical ailments, as he and his entourage make their way through England and Scotland—may be more thoroughly understood by examining yet another pattern of imagery in the novel. Although various critics have suggested the idea of order in the novel, particularly in relation to what they see as the novel's main preoccupation—"to point steadily to the superiority of a peaceful, ordered country life over anything the bustling and wicked city can provide"\(^3\)—no concerted effort has been made to study Smollett's frequent use of the terms "order" and "disorder" in the novel as a pattern, which, in its frequency and parallelism, functions both as an organizing principle and a structural component.

Organizationally and structurally this pattern can be viewed, first, in relation to the breakdown in social order which Bramble experiences in a number of places he visits (Bristol Hot Well, Bath, Clifton, London). Second, this pattern parallels Bramble's constant personal struggle to maintain his mental equilibrium and physical health against the noise and tumult and the various ailments that beset him.
And, finally, this organizing principle is reinforced in the restoration of order in his own immediate family.

The key to understanding this pattern of order and disorder lies in the development of Matthew Bramble as a character. To the extent that Bramble is both the satiric persona and at times the object of satire—his peevishness and morbid comments are as much a reflection on his own disordered perspective as they are a highly satirical account of his experience—his point of view imposes itself upon, and contrasts with, the views of the other four letter-writers in the novel. As a satirist, Bramble distances himself from the action by deliberately assuming the facade of a misanthrope ("But what have I to do with human species?" he asks, early on in the novel), and his strident social criticism underscores his role. As the object of satire, however, his peculiar excesses, brought about by his hypochondria, are held up to ridicule: "For a man is as apt to be prepossessed by particular favors as to be prejudiced by private motives of disgust. If I am partial, there is, at least, some merit in my conversion from illiberal prejudices which had grown up with my constitution" (III, 231), comments Bramble the man, seemingly unaware of its ironic implication with respect to his own misanthropic behavior. It is this incongruity between Bramble the satirist and Bramble the man that is reconciled toward the end of the expedition, paving the way for the reestablishment of his essential "good humour" and a more balanced view of things. Mary Wagoner notes that "Bramble is obsessed with men, and his experiences are a series of farcical demonstrations to remind him of that fact. He is reduced by horseplay only as his outburst become intemperate . . . 7

The search for social order is implied in the gradual progression of the Bramble entourage from city to country, from the disordered and chaotic worlds of Bath and London to the relative placidity of Glasgow and Edinburgh in Scotland. This progression also parallels the gradual tempering of Bramble's character and views as he regains his health and mental equilibrium.

His earlier letters to his close friend and personal physician Dr. Lewis are noteworthy for what they reveal about Bramble's character. His innate system of values is based on the notion of order (his constant ruminations on his own Brambleton-Hall is an indication), and he hides his basically benevolent nature beneath his affected misanthropy. Bramble
needs to purge himself of his misanthropy in order that he
may move toward a more tolerant view of life and the living.
His benevolence is demonstrated, initially, in his detailed
instructions to Dr. Lewis to put the affairs of his household
and his tenants in good order, including giving the Alderney
cow to Morgan’s widow and “forty shillings to clothe her
children” (I, 5). Even in the midst of his journeyings
Bramble does not forget either his obligations as a landed
gentry, or the need to maintain order in his household in his
absence. As one of the landed gentry, Bramble represents the
solid middle order in society—what Donald Greene describes
as the "squirearchy," "those who considered themselves . . .
the backbone of the nation"—and his innate benevolence is a
manifestation of his acknowledged role as a responsible
member of this order. At the very outset of his expedition,
Bramble is aligned with, and exemplifies, the social order.
This concern for the well-being of people, frequently
reiterated, is one of Bramble’s admirable qualities, and
Smollett clearly intends it as a contrast to his satiric
pose. It is this sense of benevolence, for instance, that
underscores Bramble’s charity to the ensign’s widow (I, 20-
3), and his admiration for the "filial virtue" of Captain
Brown (III, 262-5), two of the more moving scenes in an
otherwise unsentimental work.

If his concern for his tenant’s welfare establishes
Bramble’s benevolence and preference for an orderly life, his
misanthropic pose and hypochondria oftentimes hide his
geniality, which only Jery recognizes: "He affects
misanthropy, in order to conceal the sensibility of a heart,
which is tender, even to a degree of weakness" (I, 28). At
the same time, Jery also recognizes his uncle’s hypochondria:
"Indeed, I never knew a hypochondriac so apt to be infected
with good humour" (I, 49). Jery recognizes, as Bramble
himself does not or is unable to, that his excesses are not
simply the cause, but also the effect of his hypochondria:

What tickles another would give him torment; and yet he
has what we may call lucid intervals, when he is
remarkably facetious . . . A lucky joke, or any
ludicrous incident, will set him a-laughing
immoderately, even in one of his gloomy paroxysms; and,
when the laugh is over, he will curse his own
imbecillity [sic] . . . . When his spirits are not
exerted externally, [says Jery,] they seem to recoil and prey upon himself (I, 49).

If Bramble's hypochondria exacerbates his "spirits," his misanthropic ire and satiric eye take in a perspective that further aggravates his already overwrought sensitivity. He finds in Clifton-Downs "the daemon of vapous descend[ing] in a perpetual drizzle" (I, 11), and his first impression of Bath, viewed as it is, from "the irritable nerves of an invalid" (I, 34), is a jaundiced one. He is quick to admit to Lewis that his perspective of the city may have been altered since his last visit to Bath thirty years earlier, but now his impression is one of irritation: "This place, which Nature and Providence seems to have intended as a resource from distemper and disquiet, is become the very center of racket and dissipation" (I, 34).

What for Jery is "a source of amusement" that provides for the "humour in the farce of life" (I, 49) is for Bramble a constant source of mental and physical discomfort: "This is what my uncle reprobates," writes Jery, "as a monstrous jumble of heterogeneous principles; a vile mob of noise and impertinence, without decency or subordination" (I, 49--emphasis added). Bramble rails against the breakdown of order, but what is particularly vexing to his sensibility is that at Bath "a very inconsiderable proportion of genteel people are lost in a mob of impudent plebians, who have neither understanding nor judgment, nor the least idea of propriety and decorum; and seem to enjoy nothing so much as an opportunity of insulting their betters" (I, 37).

Bramble hears of nothing but woeful tales of shattered lives. His account of the misfortunes of Baldric, "the companion of my youth," now "metamorphosed into an old man, with a wooden leg and a weatherbeaten face," and reduced to receiving "the half-pay of a rear-admiral" as a reward for loyal service (I, 55-6); the Baronet forced to give up his parliamentary seat and sell his estate; and the genteel and "decent" families who had retreated to Bath in the hopes of settling down comfortably, but who are now forced to flee "to the mountains of Wales," are all prime examples of the insidious influence of the disordered and disjointed world of Bath (I, 57). He is mortified that they have to "lead a weary life in this stewpan of idleness and insignificance," where "every day teems with fresh absurdities, which are too gross to make a thinking man merry" (I, 56-7).
Even the architecture of the edifices in Bath is representative of the general disorder and chaotic state of the city:

The avenues [to the Square] are mean, dirty, dangerous and indirect . . . [and] the great number of small doors belonging to the separate houses, the inconsiderable height of the different orders, the affected ornaments of the architrave, which are both childish and misplaced, and the areas projecting into the street, surrounded with iron rails, destroy a good part of its effect upon the eye; and, perhaps, we shall find it still more defective, if we view it in the light of convenience (I, 34-5).

Inasmuch as it is the delicacy "in all his sensations, both of soul and body" (I, 67), that is responsible for his outburst, the honesty of Bramble's opinion of the general disorder that he experiences cannot be denied. As A.D. McKillop notes, "Like Molière's Alceste, [Bramble] can be diagnosed as a neurotic, and at the same time admired for the pride and honesty that lead him to talk harsh sense about the world."9

In short, Bramble's criticism stems as much from his measure of human nature as from the excesses of his misanthropic and distempered mind. Bramble's basically benevolent nature and habit of mind revolt at the violation of decorum and propriety, but his distemper and heightened sensitivity exaggerate his experience out of proportion. As Eric Rothstein has accurately observed:

The sick Bramble and society each reveal and cause the appearance of disease in the other: he reveals to the extent that his satire is accurate, and causes to the extent that it is not; society reveals Bramble's bad temper and raw nerves by prodding them with noxious stimuli, making them worse yet, and so causing further disorder.10

Bramble's description of the corruption in Bath, and his condemnation of the "tide of luxury" that has made London an odious place are real enough, and are borne out in contemporary accounts of the time. The social historian Dorothy George, for instance, quotes Shebbeare's description
that "in London amongst the lower class all is anarchy, drunkenness and thievery, in the country, good order, sobriety, and honesty . . . "11 But if Bramble's misanthropy often gives a keen edge to his satiric comments, his self-indulgent hypochondria at times distorts his otherwise accurate judgment of people.

Bramble's misanthropic pose, fueled by his distemper, reveals his intolerance for the mixing of classes, and his misconceived belief that the lack of such distinction and subordination can only lead to the corruption of those who move in the "upper spheres of life." He finds the "mixture of people in the entertainments of this place . . . destructive of all order and urbanity" (I, 51). Bramble's "cure," then, involves not only his health and spirits, but also the disabusement of his misconceived notions on class structure. At Jack Holder's tea-drinking, Jery, watching the activity of the mob below with Bramble and Mr. Quin, postulates that by imitating "the dress and equipage of their superiors" the lower classes "would likewise, in time, adopt their maxims and their manners, be polished by their conversation, and refined by their example" (I, 51). To his consternation, Bramble discovers that the representatives of the upper class are as capable of flouting convention and behaving indecorously as any in the vile mob of "plebians":

The two amazons who singularized themselves most in the action [in the pell-mell rush to the table "furnished" with "sweet-meats" and "nose-gays"], did not come from the purlieus of Puddle-dock, but from the courtly neighbourhood of St. James palace. One was a baroness, and the other, a wealthy knight's dowager (I, 52-3).

Bramble's misconception represents an ironic reversal for him. He mistakes appearance for reality; his entrenched social expectations contradict the nature of things, which he fails to understand, because his hypochondriacal mind refuses to acknowledge this insight: "He hung his head in manifest chagrin, and seemed to repine at the triumph of his judgment—Indeed, his victory was more complete than he imagined" (I, 52—emphasis added).

The other revealing incident occurs within Bramble's own family. Bramble violently objects to Clinker's attempts at proselytizing, because he perceives in his new-found "enthusiasm" for Methodism an insidious force designed to
destroy the distinction between classes. But Clinker’s response, "may not the new light of God’s grace shine upon the poor and the ignorant in their humility, as well as upon the wealthy, and the philosopher in all his pride of human learning?" brings only this rejoinder from Bramble: "What you imagine to be the new light of grace . . . I take to be a deceitful vapour, glimmering through a crack in your upper story" (II, 138). Here again, Bramble the satirist is accurate, but Bramble the man fails to see the irony, for it is the "vapour" of his own distemper that prevents Bramble from a clear understanding of Clinker’s virtuous, if excessive behaviour—for, as Jerry observes, "The first thing that struck him was the presumption of his lacquey (II, 137--emphasis added). As R. D. Jack indicates, "Clinker is used to reveal Bramble’s own besetting prejudice—his rigidly hierarchiacal vision of society." Bramble persists in his obsession with class distinction, when he tells Lydia, "I don’t think my servant is a proper ghostly director, for a devotee of your sex and character" (II, 187--emphasis added). Ironically, it is Clinker’s resourcefulness, and not his "rank," that time and again proves useful—once, when he saves Bramble’s life (III, 313), and at another time, when he finds an ingenious way to fix their overturned coach (II, 185–6).

But even in the midst of the general disorder, there are tales Bramble hears that remind him of his ties to humanity. The episode concerning Serle and Paunceford is one such example. Serle’s initial generosity to Paunceford, and the latter’s subsequent ingratitude, arouse Bramble’s admiration for the former; for, even though his predicament is widely known, Serle refuses to condemn his erstwhile “friend” (I, 67–70).

The mist of "vapours" that had clouded Bramble’s perspective begin lifting only after his humiliation at the hands of those he had least expected to behave indecorously. The episodes concerning Lord Oxmington’s self-indulgence and inhospitality (III, 281–5), Bullford’s practical jokes (III, 297–305), the demeaning behaviour of his Yorkshire cousin’s wife (II, 164–8), and the vanity of Baynard’s wife (III, 286–97) are on par with the despicable behaviour earlier of Sir Ulic Mackilligut and Mr. Micklewhimmen (I, 60–4; II, 173–8). Furthermore, these episodes are clearly arranged in contrast with each other in order to reinforce the satire of Bramble’s misconceptions and diatribes on class distinctions.
In one of his more temperate moments, Bramble admits to Lewis:

I find my spirits and health affect each other reciprocally—that is to say, every thing that discomposes my mind, produces a correspondent disorder in my body; and my bodily complaints are remarkably mitigated by those considerations that dissipate the clouds of mental chagrin (II, 154).

The correspondence between Bramble's health and his comments also underscores the pattern of order and disorder in the novel. The external stimuli—the attitude and behavior of the people he encounters, and the architecture and stench of the places he visits—act upon Bramble's sensibility to further insulate him from the disordered world in which he finds himself. At the same time, his own excessive reaction to his experience prevents Bramble from attaining the state of mental equilibrium that would allow him to take a more balanced view of things. But as the stimuli decrease, that is, as he and his entourage move further up north, there is a corresponding improvement in Bramble's outlook.

In his letter of June 14, quoted above, Bramble first comes to the realization that his sickness is mostly psychosomatic. Indeed, the very opening lines of the letter hint at his changing attitude: "Thank Heaven! dear Lewis, the clouds are dispersed, and I have now the clearest prospect of my summer campaign, which, I hope, I shall be able to begin to-morrow" (II, 153). It is significant that the "dispersal" of the "cloud" from Bramble's mind comes after Bramble's successful attempt at securing Clinker's release from prison where he had been incarcerated after his false arrest on a robbery charge: "The imprisonment of Clinker brought on those symptoms which I mentioned in my last, and now they are vanished at his discharge" (II, 154). It is not only the environmental disorder in Bath and London, but also his inability to accept reality that had contributed to Bramble's distempered and distorted view of things. It is ironic that perversion of justice—presumably the most impartial class-leveller—is far more insidious than the artificial distinction between classes in society which Bramble had tried to uphold. When Justice Buzzard's "severity to Clinker was no other than a hint to his master to make him a present in private, as an acknowledgment of his
candour and humanity," Bramble finds the proposition so "unpalatable" that "he declared, with great warmth, he would rather confine himself for life to London, which he detested, than be at liberty to leave it tomorrow, in consequence of encouraging corruption in a magistrate" (II, 152).

The physical and mental discomfort that had made Bramble surly, sarcastic, and distempered— in short, that which had contributed to his misconceptions and prevented him from understanding the contradictory impulses within himself— gradually yields to a more balanced view of life. Bramble finds the "pastoral" quality of the river Clyde (III, 269) a fitting antidote to the "abominable discharges of various kinds" of the Hot Well at Bath (I, 46). Whereas the distorted and horrendous noise of the abbey bells at Bath had discomposed Bramble, the melodious peel of the steeple bells in Edinburgh moves him to proclaim it "very striking to the ears of a stranger" (II, 219). In what is clearly a movement from disorder to order, Bramble, who had earlier condemned the architecture in Bath and London, now waxes eloquent on the castle and the palace of Holyrood-house in Edinburgh which, he notes, are "sublime in scite [sic] and architecture" and "a jewel in architecture" (III, 233).

Whereas in his earlier letters Bramble had unequivocally condemned the mercantile nature of London society which had made it a "mishapen and monstrous capital, without head or tail, members or proportion," he views Scotland with approval (I, 90). He has mellowed enough from his previously rather splenetic outlook to praise Glasgow as "one of the prettiest towns in Europe" (III, 245-6). Scotland transforms Bramble the curmudgeon into Bramble the poet, and thus begins the process of Bramble's regeneration. There is even a tinge of nostalgia in Bramble's leave-taking of Scotland, which he describes as his "arcadia," his "paradise" (III, 257, 252).

For Bramble, Scotland is the symbol of natural order, not merely in its layout and splendid scenery, in the hospitality of its people, and in the lack of ostentation and vanity in public life, but also in its rejuvenating air, which reminds him of his own Brambleton-Hall. Bramble finds much to commend in Scotland, and even his disapproval, as Louis Martz states, "is judicious and mild— at times even apologetic." Whereas in London he found the commerce and industry contributing to and sustaining the "chaos," in Glasgow he finds the same mercantilism contributing to "a perfect bee-hive in point of industry" (III, 246). Scotland,
for Bramble, is the highpoint of his journeyings, culminating in his coming to terms both with his hypochondria and the manifest prejudice he had exhibited earlier, and to a grudging acceptance of his family of "originals." As Linda Pannill suggests, "the progress from a state of bedevilment to heavenly order is reflected both in society through which [Bramble] moves and in the family itself."  

In Dennison, Bramble finds the embodiment of that perspicacity, decorum, and orderliness to life that he had missed since leaving Brambleton-Hall. There is much in his friend for Bramble to admire. Both Dennison and his wife are down-to-earth, congenial, unpretentious, and suffused with that spirit of altruism that does not fail to cheer Bramble's spirits. Dennison's success at turning a financially disastrous land into a thriving farm through sheer hard work and diligent application of efficient farming techniques, combined with his cheerful outlook, have contributed to his orderly life. As Bramble writes Lewis, Dennison "has really attained to that pitch of rural felicity, at which I have been aspiring these twenty years in vain" (III, 320). In his frugality, moderation, and lack of ostentation, Dennison is clearly a contrast to Bramble's unfortunate friend Baynard.  

When Bramble finds Baynard's estate almost decimated through the latter's misguided indulgence of his wife's frivolous vanity--"the shameful spell by which he seems enchanted" (III, 289)--it is Dennison, in his "goodness of heart," who takes Baynard under his wing and, by teaching him the proper farming method, holds out the hope of eventual reclamation of his estate (III, 343).  

Bramble's progress from city to country thus parallels the movement from disorder to order. Correspondingly, Bramble's earlier disorder and the gradual rejuvenation of his health and spirits also come full circle. Whereas in his earlier letters he had railed against the "hell" of Bath and London, complained of "gout" and "rheumatism," Bramble now praises the durability of friendship, the advantage of sheep farming, and the salubrious air of the countryside. If the transformation in Bramble is indicative of his gradually tempering outlook, it is also due to the reaffirmation of order within his own immediate family.  

Tabitha, whose "natural austerity [had] been soured by disappointment in love," and whose avarice, primping vanity, and "perverseness of nature" (I, 60–1) had in no small measure contributed to exacerbate Bramble's delicate
sensibility, has finally succeeded in landing a husband, a task in which she had wholeheartedly employed herself since leaving Brambleton Hall. She who had earlier been described as "a domestic plague," "the most diabolically capricious," and a "wild cat" (I, 61, 22, 14) has finally met her match in Lismahago. In marrying Lismahago, Tabitha foreswears her excesses, and is "humanized." The "noli me tangere" in Bramble's "flesh" (I, 61) has, by assuming the mantle of a housewife, presumably been domesticated, by "alter[ing] her temperment [sic] to femininely submissive." Or, as Jery says, "the vinegar of Mrs. Tabby is remarkably dulcified" (III, 333).

Lismahago, for his part, is also "cured" of his excesses by being "yoked" to Tabby, and thereby made a responsible member of the Bramble household. Lismahago, who was "so polemical, that every time he opened his mouth out flew a paradox" (II, 201), and whose constant violent, disorderly behavior, and championing of views contrary to his own interests had so exasperated Bramble, and made him an object of satire, is now purged of his "polemical arrogance," and is left with his essential "dignity of an honorable career" intact. He can now look forward to "taking the heath in all weathers" with Bramble (III, 351). In thus aligning himself with the family, he "functions to provoke the metamorphosis in Tabby which opens the way for familial harmony and good health for Matthew." Robert Hopkins has also commented on Lismahago's role in helping Bramble attain a more balanced perspective:

Lismahago as a therapeutic foil helps to ameliorate Matthew's morbid imagination . . . [by] serv[ing] as a catharsis for Matthew's grotesque views . . . [in the] sense of alleviating the squire's fears and anxieties by bringing them to consciousness and giving them objectivity.

Lydia's character, too, undergoes change. Bramble's earlier condescending opinion of her--"soft as butter, and as easily melted," and as one who "has got a languishing eye, and reads romances" (I, 12)--is overturned in the face of her gradual maturity. Initially naive, idealistic, and impressionable, Lydia becomes more aware, more realistic about life. Whereas her earlier letters had gushed with
sentiment unhampered by critical judgment, her last letters are evidence of her tempering outlook:

There is such malice, treachery and dissimulation even among professed friends and intimate companions, as cannot fail to strike a virtuous mind with horror; and when Vice quits the stage for a moment, her place is immediately occupied by Folly, which is often too serious to excite any thing but compassion (III, 308).

Even her letter to Mrs. Jermyn, requesting her aid in securing the presence of her friend Miss Willis at her wedding, is striking for its restraint, propriety, and decorum (III, 336-7).

Her marriage to Wilson is ideal in more respects than one. Not only is Wilson "her equal in rank and superior in fortune" (III, 332), but the revelation that Wilson is actually Dennison's son provides for a satisfactory and orderly resolution of the novel. Dennison, Bramble's friend and social equal, is now coopted into the Bramble household, the felicity of friendship reinforced by the bond of family ties.

The introduction of Humphry Clinker also reinforces the structural pattern of order and disorder. Clinker joins the Bramble entourage without "a shirt to his back," "shewing his bare posteriors," and with "the rags that he wore . . . hardly conceal[ing] what decency requires to be covered" (I, 81), but his demonstrated loyalty and devotion to Bramble has an ameliorating effect upon the latter:

So far as I can observe, the fellow's character is downright simplicity, warmed with a kind of enthusiasm, which renders him very susceptible of gratitude and attachment to his benefactors (II, 153).

The discovery of Clinker's parentage--that he is Bramble's long-lost son and the evidence of his "disordered" youth (when, perhaps, Bramble was less cantankerous and distraught)--only reinforces the pattern of order. Clinker's marriage to Tabitha's maid Win, in effect, assures not only his place in the household, but defines his social bounds as well.

The purging of the excesses in the main characters, the triple wedding, the recognition of a long-lost son, and the
Order and Disorder in Humphry Clinker

return of Bramble to good health are all parallel movements conforming to the pattern suggested earlier. Bramble's benevolence is never in doubt, and the end of the novel reinforces this idea: "the amelioration has, with each character, been a movement toward the norm of easier, more tolerant, more reasonable behavior . . . "19

The conventional happy ending of Humphry Clinker, Sheridan Baker has pointed out, aligns it with the tradition of the comic romance--in this case, "the comic romance of man's social ambitions, the physical fact behind his facade, the limited view he mistakes for universal validity"--a view not inconcomitant with the pattern I have discussed.20 The prospect of return to Brambleton Hall reinforces and reiterates the order that Bramble had left behind at the start of his expedition. His journeyings through the socially disordered societies of Bristol, Bath, and London, his return to good health in Scotland, and the affirmation of the familial ties through the various marriages, all suggest the pattern of order and disorder in Smollett's Humphry Clinker.

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NOTES


2. William Park discusses the imagery of water and excrement in "Fathers and Sons -- Humphry Clinker," Literature and Psychology, 16 (1966), 166-174. See also Baker, above.

4. For a discussion of Smollett's satiric art, particularly the duality of vision of Bramble, as mirror and icon, see Ronald Paulson, Satire and the Novel in the Eighteenth Century (New Haven, 1967), pp. 201-3.

5. Tobias Smollett The Expedition of Humphry Clinker, ed. Lewis M. Knapp (London, 1966), I, 47. All references to the work are from this edition and will be cited by volume and page number in the text.


15. Pannill, p. 42.

16. Wagoner, p. 112.
Order and Disorder in Humphry Clinker

17. Pannill, p. 42.

