
Eugène Joliat
University of Toronto

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BOOK REVIEWS


How intriguing that the first volume of the Sorbonne’s new literature series should be a book on Smollett! M. Boucé’s thesis for the Doctorat ès Lettres is a very impressive piece of work, in breadth and in depth. He makes a strong case for the contemporaneity of Smollett, and — more than any other — his own book bears eloquent witness to the durability of the latter’s continuing reputation as a novelist.

His over-all plan is well-conceived and well executed: after a General Introduction which is a perspicacious and trenchant criticism of work done on Smollett from the earliest biographies right up to the present, the book is divided into three parts: De Smollett à ses romans, Structure et morale, and Les Procédés littéraires. These well-rounded main divisions — each one having its own concluding chapter — are followed by a general conclusion, in which the dispassionate critic seems momentarily to give way to the moralist; but it is only to show how Smollett’s reckless courage (witness his attack on Admiral Knowles, a passage of which M. Boucé analyzes with great perspicacity) is a vivifying tonic for our fearful, banal times, just as his novels show the same disproportion as today between rich and poor, the have and have nots. At the same time, Smollett’s novels are a beacon along the path of a powerful tradition, that of a comic, almost protean, verbal creation which reaches far back: from Shakespeare up through Dickens, Lewis Carroll, James Joyce, even Anthony Burgess and John Lennon (the very title A Spaniard in the Works brings Win Jenkins to mind). In his final paragraph, M. Boucé establishes a striking parallel between Smollett and his successors:

"L’oeuvre de Smollett se situe sur les plans historique et littéraire au carrefour de deux cultures: celle d’une société encore rurale qui se meurt et celle d’une société pré-industrielle qui est en train de naître. Burgess et Lennon, eux, font éclater la langue au seuil de l’ère spatiale. Le comique verbal de Smollett dans Humphry Clinker, et celui de ses successeurs modernes, apparaît donc comme volonté de détruire, mais aussi de créer pour se protéger d’un néant inélocutable par une dernière incantation aux forces de la vie."
BOOK REVIEWS

M. Boucé carries the reader right along with him; one has rarely any feeling of déjà vu”; fresh insights abound in every chapter. Yet everything is scrupulously documented, each example taken from the novels having its references in the text, and each chapter full notes immediately following.

The author is careful to state from the beginning that whatever methods he adopted in the preparation of the various parts of his book, an absolute priority has been given to the text of the novels. It is puzzling, therefore, to find that his references are normally to the Henley edition of 1899-1901, which he says was established "sans aucun souci de recherche textuelle". I question whether it is good practice, in an otherwise meticulous work of research, to let a desired sense of unity in the references and a wish to be useful to the greatest number of readers (p. 10) take precedence over the necessity to refer back to original texts. M. Boucé’s own text contains, especially in the earlier part, a “sic” whenever Smollett’s spelling seems to be unusual: Smollett’s or Henley’s? (Actually, I think it more than likely that Smollett’s original text was checked each time; still, I think the reader would have been glad to be reassured on this score.)

Part I is divided into three chapters: Esquisse biographique, La Personnalité de Smollett: essai d’analyse, and Autobiographie et romans. The first chapter is a rapid review of Smollett’s life and career, with emphasis on three pivotal points: the expedition to Carthage, the Knowles affair, and the Briston editorship, all of which marked Smollett deeply, despite (or perhaps because of) his extraordinary combative ness and tenacity of purpose. Chapter II studies Smollett’s personality and is based on works on characterology, those of the philosophers Le Sienne and Gaston Berger. There are fascinating insights into the character of our highly emotive, irascible, generous, humanitarian Scot, whose latent capacity and readiness for action, tenacity of will and feeling, loyalty to friends, love of history, intellectual curiosity, introspection and moral puritanism would tend to place him in an Emotif-Actif-Secondaire category (by contrast, Sterne is an Emotif-Non-actif-Primaire). One might have a moment’s unease about this sort of pigeon-holing, were it not that M. Boucé himself invites the reader (note p. 93) to be cautious in accepting the categories as absolutes. Chapter III is an attempt to lay finally to rest the commonly-held notion that Smollett’s novels are autobiographical. The title of the first third of the book indicates the direction of flow, and the position taken by M. Boucé: from Smollett to his novels.

Part II begins with a study of the two incontestable influences on Smollett’s novels (Don Quixote and Gil Blas), in the course of which
M. Boucé — in this and later chapters — castigates the "mythe picaresque" of Smollettian criticism. If there is a picaresque in Smollett, it can only be Ferdinand Fathom, and even in his case the term must be applied with caution.

The remainder of Part II is a close study in three chapters of the structure of the novels. It is notable in that M. Boucé destroys once and for all the commonplace many of us have been guilty of: that Smollett is amoral, and that there is a total absence of structure in his novels. Almost the contrary is true. Smollett's highly-developed awareness of the problems of Good and Evil imparts to all his novels (whether consciously, or subconsciously following what Paul Fussell calls "the pattern of comic — or ironic — reversal") the peculiar structure they have, and it follows that even stories such as those of Miss Williams and Melopoyn, for example, have a part to play in the over-all design. Structure in this sense is not a direct function of plot (which may be awkward or unskillful); nor is the moral significance of the hero's adventures to be found solely at the end of the novels; it is at the same time armature and mainspring. The over-all unity of the moral life, with its ups and downs, is precisely what confers a structure on the novels. In Roderick Random, for example, the adventures follow a W-shaped pattern, the three upper points representing Roderick's birth, his rediscovery of Narcissa at Bath, and his marriage, while the two lower points symbolize his shipwreck and his stay in prison. Peregrine Pickle bears a family resemblance to the first novel, implicit in the vanity of the two heroes and even in the reappearance of Morgan. Its thematic pattern is that of a capital V, primarily the downward moral evolution of Peregrine from birth to imprisonment, followed by the rapid recovery of his fortune, the short horizontal tops representing the introduction of the characters and the plateau of matrimonial happiness. Like the first two novels, Ferdinand Count Fathom and Lancelot Greaves are discussed in a single chapter, which is admirably done, one of the best in the book (we look forward to M. Boucé's forthcoming edition of Greaves). The heroes are radically opposite types, but the moral purpose is evident throughout both novels; Smollett seems increasingly fascinated by the forces of Good and Evil which operate here on three levels, individual, social, metaphysical. M. Boucé feels that it may in fact have been the "vigueur architectonique des intentions morales" of Smollett that prevented the novels from achieving lasting success (Fathom's structural schema is that of a capital V flanked by two lower-case V's upside down, whereas Greaves' is that of a circle). M. Boucé's main effort, of course, bears on Humphry Clinker (55 pages compared to 42 for FCF and LG and 40 for RR and PP) and it is first-
rate literary criticism. He suggests that the title could mean "la libération opérée par Humphry Clinker", since the latter acts as a moral catalyzer in the evolution of the characters, especially Matthew Bramble. The novel has a three-fold dialectic: socio-economic (sharp criticism of the urban scene, description of and judgments on Scotland, the thought that happiness consists of a return to nature), psychological (on various levels, family, social, national), and moral (the over-all effort by which the individual transcends his inner contradictions, in the midst of a generally hostile society).

Part III. In the 19th and even the 20th centuries, Smollett was often accused of deforming by his satirical point of view the picture of the brutal, coarse world about him — as though his novels were a monstrous caricature of reality deliberately travestied. In the first chapter of this part, La représentation du réel, M. Boucé shows, by constant references to 18th century life, publications, and even official documents (e.g., terms of the Vagrancy Act of 1744, the Bread Controversy of 1757, pamphlets such as Poison Detected, or Frightful Truths, etc.) that what has been taken for exacerbated satire was simply the echo of social and historical preoccupations. Smollett shows no complacency in the depiction of the dregs of society; his universe is violent; his characters simply approach their physiological needs and their excesses with full-bodied frankness. Emotions, of course, are not Smollett's strong point; except in Humphry Clinker (where the prismatic effect of the letters sometimes makes for a kind of monologue intérieur and best translates inner time), Smollett depicts emotions as paroxysms, which are invariably physical or physiological. However, the charge of indecency (Saintsbury) has been clearly exaggerated: there is no obscenity, no pornography, no eroticism; allusions to sex are rare and it is often frustrated.

Smollett's representation of reality, however, cannot be discussed adequately without taking his humour into consideration. M. Boucé studies the Structures du comique in Chapter II with a maestria all the more remarkable in that the author is presumably not an Anglo-Saxon. From simple gags ("le gag est . . . la negation fugitive de la finalité anthropocentrique") through "psychological" humour (e.g., interplay of innocence and vanity) to the protean humour which finds its ultimate expression in Humphry Clinker, we have a remarkable study in depth of an elusive subject; the final appraisal is worth quoting:

"Au terme de cette étude, le comique dans les romans de Smollett apparaît comme la partie la plus sérieuse, en tout cas la plus durable, d'une sagasse de vivre ou, en d'autres termes, de cet art quotidien de bien mourir."
The last chapter (Aspects stylistiques) is an attempt to fill a partial void: no over-all attempt has yet been made to study Smollett's style. M. Boucé, however, disclaims any pretense to scientific study of the kind which would be based, say, on computer programming (necessitating, as he says, several more volumes). It would be ungracious of the reader to expect it, in a book otherwise so complete. What we have instead is an analysis of some twenty selections representative of Smollett's manner of writing. M. Boucé uses a method of stylistic analysis, however, which is based on Henri Morier's highly impressionistic Psychologie des Styles (1959), which attempts to show the relationships between an author's style and his personality, an approach which experts on stylistics feel is of questionable validity from the point of view of literary criticism (it is an interesting corollary to note that M. Boucé's chapter on Smollett's personality (I,II) is itself based on pre-established categories). However, despite this general stricture (which the author foresees will be made), his commentaries on samples of Smollett's style furnish new and highly perspicacious views which later "scientific" analyses may very likely corroborate.

Misprints are extremely rare (p. 44: "Separation of the Public Joint in Pregnancy"; p. 98: "identifications"; p. 213: "acien"; p. 84, note 56 should read note 65; p. 398: "a queue that reached to his rum"). One small inconsistency: the probable date of Nathaniel Dance's portrait of Smollett is given on page 71 as "vers 1764" and on page 125 as "vers 1756 sans doute". In the first instance, Smollett is called "prematurément vieilli" — he would have appeared even more so if such a portrait had actually been painted in 1756. But these are blemishes of little practical importance. The book is well-written, clear, vigorous, positive. It is to be hoped that it will be translated into English as soon as possible: it is a high point in the history of Smollett studies.

EUGÈNE JOLIAT
University of Toronto