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PROVENCE AND THE BRITISH IMAGINATION IN TOBIAS SMOLLETT'S *TRAVELS THROUGH FRANCE AND ITALY* (1766)

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LERMA

From 1763 to 1765, Tobias Smollett travelled through France (1) and Italy. On his return to England he used his private correspondence as a basis for a semi-fictional book (2) that was an immediate bestseller in Great Britain: *Travels through France and Italy* (1766). *Travels through France and Italy* have remained famous for drawing British attention to Nice and its surroundings. As the full title puts it, the text contains "a particular description of the Town, Territory, and Climate of Nice: To which is added, A Register of the Weather, kept during a Residence of Eighteen Months in that City". As a matter of fact, the book contributed to turning Nice into a winter health resort for the British upperclass in the nineteenth century, and the city later thanked Smollett for his attention by giving his name to a street.

But the emphasis on Nice and its region (3) should not make us forget that the text provides many details about other towns of Provence, such as Marseilles, Avignon, Nîmes or Montpellier, to give just a few examples. However, we must be aware that Nice was not strictly speaking part of Provence in 1763 and 1764. The county of Nice belonged to the kingdom of Sardinia, and the town was therefore not French. Moreover, some of the towns mentioned above, such as Avignon or Nîmes, were not part of the French province of Provence. Avignon and the surrounding Comtat Venaissin were ruled by the papacy: they would not become French territories until the Revolution. Nîmes was a French town, but one of the major cities of Languedoc, a province which Smollett's traveller explicitly sets apart from what he calls Provence (Letter XII, p. 107). Other towns now located in "Drôme provençale" belonged to the province of Dauphiné (Letter XL, p. 336). Provence in *Travels* is therefore quite different a geographical from what it is nowadays. Nevertheless, this article will rely on a broader definition of Provence as a synonym for what the traveller calls "the south of France" (Letter IX, p. 75; Letter XII, p. 110; Letter XXXIX, p. 331).

Now, if Smollett's *Travels* are easily associated with Provence, we must admit that, at first sight, they seem to leave little space for imagination. As its full title suggests, the book has all the appearance of a detailed travel guide providing the British reader on his Grand Tour with "Observations on Character, Custom, Religion, Government, Police, Commerce, Arts and Antiquities." The word "observations" indicates that the traveller is a post-Lockeian eyewitness who relies on first-hand experience to instruct his reader: the emphasis is on

'sightseeing', not on those visions of the mind which the word “imagination” immediately calls forth.

However, the two letters "M. D." below the title and the epistolary nature of *Travels* signal that observation and point of view are inseparable notions. Like Smollett himself, the semi-fictional traveller is a doctor, that is to say a learned man with a specific approach to the countries he visits. Moreover, the travel guide is actually made up of his private correspondence with family and friends. The peculiarity of the traveller’s point of view is further enhanced by the first letter, which informs the reader that the doctor is an ill, cantankerous man travelling south to recover from both serious lung disorders and "domestic calamity" (Letter I, p. 2).

Hope and melancholy could have offered fertile ground for the free expression of the traveller’s imagination, but *Travels* is not a lyrical narrative in the romantic vein. The first section of this article aims to show that the traveller’s anticipation and perception of Provence are in fact subordinated to a satirical intention which contributes to forging Great Britain’s image as a nation. Thus Provence as it appears in *Travels* is shaped by 'British imagination', and provides a foil for the definition of the traveller’s native country. However, the last section of this article suggests that the text at times expresses another type of imagination – one that goes together with a genuine aesthetic appreciation of Provence’s natural landscapes as well as a more tolerant approach to its people.

The itinerary followed by the traveller through the South of France is mainly determined by his health problems. From the start, he has planned to spend the winter of 1763 in Nice, a little town whose mild climate he hopes will cure his lung disorders. Nice is also supposed to have lower living costs than many locations in the South of France. The reason why the traveller makes a detour to Montpellier on his way to Nice is mainly because he longs "to try what effect the boasted air of Montpellier would have upon [his] constitution […]" (Letter IX, p. 73). Each step of the traveller’s itinerary in Provence is carefully recorded: in Letter IX, he leaves Dauphiné and enters Languedoc. On his way to Montpellier, he visits the Pont du Gard and Nîmes (Letter IX, p. 73). Dissatisfied with Montpellier’s climate, he then sets off for Nice and passes through a series of towns and villages: Beaucaire, Tarascon, then "a wretched place called Orgon" (Letter XII, p. 107), Brignoles, Le Luc, Muy, and Fréjus. He then travels through the Esterel Mountains and stops in Cannes, which he describes as "a little fishing town, agreeably situated on the beach of the sea […]" : he passes through Antibes, "a small maritime town, tolerably well fortified", and reaches the village St Laurent, or "the extremity of France" (Letter XII, p. 112). Later, he crosses "the Var, which divides the County of Nice from Provence" (Letter XII, p. 113) and finally settles in Nice in December 1763. A few months later, the traveller goes on a tour of Italy (Letter XXV, p. 202) then returns to Nice to spend his second winter there (Letter XXXV, p. 308). Finding his health greatly restored, he leaves Nice in April 1765 and visits several towns of Provence on his way back to England: Antibes, Cannes, Frejus, Toulon, and Marseilles are portrayed in Letter XXXIX, while Letter XL gives a long account of Aix-en-Provence ("the capital of Provence [...] a large city" Letter XL, p. 333); it also evokes the history of Avignon and Orange, before the traveller enters Dauphiné again and leaves the South of France.

Based as it is on the traveller’s first-hand experience of Provence, which is closely inspired by Smollett’s own stay in this region, *Travels* provides the contemporary British reader with a wealth of details concerning every aspect of life in the South of France. The climate, but also the quality of the soil and type of agriculture, and the architecture in cities are among the many subjects which are described in *Travels*. From his careful observations the traveller draws general conclusions: for instance, having noticed that the vegetables sold

in Aix-en-Provence markets are not so good as those that are found in Nice, he explains that people in Aix are poor gardeners because they focus their efforts on the fabrication and commerce of olive oil, wine and silk. Silk he calls "the staple of Provence, which is every where [*sic*] shaded with plantations of mulberry trees, for the nourishment of the worms" (Letter XL, p. 335). Among the various subjects which attract the traveller's attention are the peculiarities of the ancient Provençal "[...] from which the Italian, Spanish, and French languages, have been formed. This is the language that rose upon the ruins of the Latin tongue, after the irruptions of the Goths, Vandals, Huns, and Burgundians, by whom the Roman Empire was destroyed" (Letter XXI, p. 181).

This linguistic comment reveals the traveller's interest in Provence as a territory formerly colonized by the Latins and before them by the Greeks. He is very careful to remind the reader of the ancient Latin and Greek names of each town that he visits in Provence: for example we learn that Nîmes was "antienlty [*sic*] called Nemausis" (Letter X, p. 82) while Fréjus is introduced as "the Forum Julianum of the antients" and Antibes is defined as "the Antipolis of the antients, said to have been built, like Nice, by a colony from Marseilles" (Letter XII, p. 111). Yet the traveller's interest in antiquities is never more manifest than during his visits to the Pont du Gard and Nîmes (5), whose famous classical monuments have motivated his detour to Montpellier at least as much as his health problems did (6).

The Pont du Gard on the one hand and the Maison Carrée and amphitheatre in Nîmes on the other hand do not fall short of the traveller's expectations. His great admiration is conveyed in Letter X (pp. 80-85) by the recurring use of the adjectives "noble" and "magnificent" which express the "awe and veneration" that cannot fail to strike even the most indifferent spectator of such "majesty and grandeur". The traveller is impressed by their perfect preservation, since they stand "[...] entire like the effect of enchantment" and defeat time. Another reason for the enduring beauty of ancient monuments is their architectural style, which conveys the "simplicity and greatness of the antients [*sic*]" and is "so unaffectedly elegant, so simple and majestic".

The traveller's reverence for the antiquities of Provence, however, stands in stark contrast to the contempt which he expresses towards its modern architecture and inhabitants. First, the ornate style of modern buildings seems even more tasteless when compared with the simplicity of ancient architecture, and the traveller is disgusted with what he calls the ornaments of "French foppery" (Letter X, p. 82). Moreover, the modern inhabitants of Provence show no respect for their ancient heritage. For instance, the citizens of Nîmes are said to remove the stones from the Roman amphitheatre to build their own houses. The traveller is so shocked that he denounces the "Gothic avarice" and "sacrilegious violation" of the citizens who everyday "mutilate" the venerable monument (Letter X, p. 84).

Because of its prestigious origins as a Greek and Latin colonial territory, the South of France provides the traveller with a double analogy: France becomes a synonym for barbarism, and Great Britain becomes the only legitimate heir of the Roman Empire in the Augustan age, which is actually the period when the Pont du Gard was built. The Pont du Gard acquires a symbolic status in this double analogy precisely because it is an aqueduct, that is to say one of those buildings which the Romans used to supply towns with clean water. As a matter of fact, the Romans' fondness for clean water, which their aqueducts and public baths testify to, is offered as proof that Great Britain is the new Roman Empire. Indeed, in the last letter of *Travels*, the traveller sings the praises of Great Britain as "the land of cleanliness" (7) of the body and the soul. Conversely, the traveller regularly represents French people, and people from the south of France, as filthy creatures lacking basic hygiene, in particular regarding their use of water (8).

For instance, the condition of the sewers in most inns near Orgon and Beaucaire is the subject of a long development about the "beastliness" of the inhabitants of Provence (Letter XII, pp. 107-108), a beastliness which, as the traveller puts it "would appear detestable even in the capital of North Britain". Clean water is such a fundamental of good health in the traveller's opinion that its absence in the diet of the peasants in the South of France, where wine is drunk instead, is supposed to explain why they are "half starved, diminutive, swarthy, and meagre [...]" (Letter IX, p. 75). Admittedly, the traveller may be clear-sighted when he claims that too much of the soil of Provence is lost on vineyards and that it should be used to grow corn instead. Nevertheless his nationalistic bias becomes obvious when he adds that the benefits of clean water can only be matched by those of the "strong, nourishing [...] small-beer of England" (9). The commendation of the native English ale was actually one of the *topoi* of British patriotic discourse – one thinks for instance of *Gin Lane* and *Beer Street*, two prints that were issued by William Hogarth in 1751, in which the inhabitants of Beer Street look happy and healthy, whereas those in Gin Lane fall victim to their addiction to the foreign spirit of gin.

The satirical intentions behind the travel guide are therefore revealed: the aim of the book is not so much to advise British travellers on their journey through the South of France (10) as to promote the image of Augustan Great Britain. In the process the text launches attack on the flaws of France – its main cultural and economic rival, and indeed the country with which the British were almost constantly at war in the eighteenth century (11). The description of Toulon, for instance, betrays the patriotism that underlies *Travels*: after a few words in praise of the arsenal (12), the traveller draws attention to the weak state of the fortifications, which is in keeping with the "imbecility [...] weakness and neglect of the French administration" that maintains in Toulon "two thousand pieces of iron cannon unfit for service" (Letter XXXIX, p. 330).

But as the satirical discourse becomes manifest, so do the traveller's prejudices: after all, the only natives whom he actually meets are shopkeepers, innkeepers, and coachmen (13). Even if his insularity extends to his countrymen and is presented as a defining trait of the true British man (14), it progressively discredits his point of view. Admittedly, the many quarrels which he has on the road over the price of his lodging, for instance in Brignoles or in Muy (Letter XII, pp. 109-111) point to the "imposition" which, he argues, "prevails all over the south of France, though it is generally supposed to be the cheapest and most plentiful part of the kingdom" (Letter XXXIX, p. 331). It must be added that such imposition was a known fact which even Laurence Sterne complained about on his stay in the South of France in 1763 (15). Yet, the traveller's defensive tone, his suspicious mind, finally betray his own intolerance and suggest that he may not be such a reliable witness after all.

One of the episodes which best signals the traveller's exaggerated prejudices takes place as he crosses the Alps on his way to Turin. Having heard that these mountains were "infested with *contrabandiers*, a set of smuggling peasants, very bold and desperate" the traveller "did not doubt that there was a gang of these free-booters at hand". Consequently, on seeing two travellers coming his way he "resolved to let them know" he was "prepared for defence" and he fired one of his pistols. But the snow on the mountains provided no reverberation and the sound was "no louder than that of a pop-gun". Finally, one of the threatening strangers turned out to be an acquaintance of his, "the Marquis M. whom [he] had the honour to be acquainted with at Nice" (Letter XXXVIII, p. 319-320).

The satirist, therefore, becomes the object of his own satire, and the reader is invited to reflect on the combination of prejudices and first-hand observations in the traveller's text. Because it weaves together two satirical voices, *Travels* provides an example of the

'dialogism' defined by Bakhtin: the dialogism of *Travels* paves the way for the polyphony Smollett experimented with in his last novel, *Humphry Clinker* (1771) (16), a fictional epistolary text which displays the contrasted points of view of five characters on their tour of Scoltand.

It should be remarked that *Travels* also anticipates *Humphry Clinker* in its praise of rural landscapes (17), as can be seen for instance in this passage set in Brignoles:

> When I rose in the morning, and opened a window that looked into the garden, I thought myself either in a dream, or bewitched. All the trees were cloathed with snow, and all the country covered at least a foot thick. 'This cannot be the South of France, (said I to myself) it must be the Highlands of Scotland!'

But the appreciative description of "rural beauties" conveys no satirical intention in *Travels*, whereas it is part of a satirical opposition between town and country in *Humphry Clinker* (18). That is why the enchantment that the traveller feels as he watches natural landscapes in *Travels* (19) is different from the "enchantment" that classical monuments inspire him with. The traveller seems to open up to a world of aesthetic perception that is disconnected from the patriotic discourse that prevails elsewhere in the text, as we can see in this long description of the Esterel mountains:

> The mountain is covered with pines, and the *laurus cerasus* [sic], the fruit of which being now ripe, made a most romantic appearance through the snow that lay upon the branches. The cherries were so large that I at first mistook them for dwarf oranges. I think they are counted poisonous in England, but here the people eat them without hesitation. In the middle of the mountain is the post-house, where we dined in a room so cold, that the bare remembrance of it makes my teeth chatter. After dinner I chanced to look into another chamber that fronted the south, where the sun shone; and opening a window perceived, within a yard of my hand, a large tree loaded with oranges, many of which were ripe. You may judge what my astonishment was to find Winter in all his rigour reigning on one side of the house, and Summer in all her glory on the other. Certain it is, the middle of this mountain seemed to be the boundary of the cold weather. As we proceeded slowly in the afternoon we were quite enchanted. This side of the hill is a natural plantation of the most agreeable ever-greens, pines, firs, laurel, cypress, sweet myrtle, tamarisc, box, and juniper, interspersed with sweet marjoram, lavender, thyme, wild thyme, and sage. On the right-hand the ground shoots up into agreeable cones, between which you have delightful vistas of the Mediterranean, which washes the foot of the rock; and between two divisions of the mountains, there is a bottom watered by a charming stream, which greatly adds to the rural beauties of the scene (Letter XII, p. 112).

Calling the traveller or Smollett "romantic" would be anachronistic and inaccurate (20), but *Travels* undeniably manifests at times the traveller's sensitive heart in a way that is independent of the satirical intentions of the text.

Finally, if the landscapes of Provence are among many that prompt the traveller to praise rural beauties in *Travels*, it is in Provence only that he comes closer to claiming friendship with a foreigner, a French coachman named Joseph. The traveller met Joseph on his way from Dauphiné to Provence and, against all odds, they are brought together near Orgon:

> In the middle of the plain, betwixt Orgon and this river, we met the coach in which we had travelled eighteen months before, from Lyons to Montpellier, conducted by our old driver Joseph, who no sooner recognized my servant at a distance, by his musquetoon, than he came running towards our carriage, and seizing my hand, even shed tears of joy. Joseph had been travelling through Spain, and was so imbrowned by the sun, that he might have passed for an Iroquois. I was much pleased with the marks of gratitude which the poor fellow expressed towards his benefactors. He had some private conversation with our voiturier, whose name

> was Claude, to whom he gave such a favourable character of us, as in all probability induced him to be wonderfully obliging during the whole journey (Letter XL, pp. 337-338).

Admittedly, it is Joseph who cries tears of joy on seeing the traveller, but the phrase "the poor fellow" conveys the Britishman's friendly feelings. And while the mention of Joseph's travels through Spain and his resemblance to an Iroquois further enhance his status as a foreigner, the "wonderfully obliging" attitude adopted by the other coachman, and the mention of his first name – Claude – suggest that hostility based on ignorance can be replaced by mutual respect and gratitude.

To conclude, at first sight the book provides a description of Provence that is based on observations, not imagination, particularly since it is inspired by Smollett's own experience on the Continent from 1763 to 1765. We soon realize, however, that the representation of Provence provides a perfect foil for the patriotic image of Great Britain: it enables the traveller to denounce the flaws of Great Britain's main cultural rivals – France and Italy (when Nice is concerned). But as the text unveils its satirical intentions and reveals the traveller's prejudices, *Travels* appears as a book *about* British imagination, and about imagination in general – about the combination and interplay of inherited stereotypes and individual perceptions that make up the traveller's observations. A very rich text, *Travels* proves both a detailed source of information about Provence and a highly subjective representation of this region. It aims to instruct the reader about the visited country but its emphasis on the traveller's point of view also paves the way for Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (21), published two years later.

NOTES:

1. Smollett had already stayed in Paris in the summer of 1750 (Joliat Etienne, *Smollett et la France*, p. 100-110).

2. For discussions about the semi-fictional nature of *Travels*, see Robert E. Kelley, "From Letter to "Letter:" Smollett's *Travels*" *Studies in Scottish Literature* and Peter Miles, "*A Semi-Mental Journey: Structure and Illusion in Smollett's* Travels." *Prose Studies*.

3. Among the 41 letters that make up *Travels*, 13 deal with Nice and its surrounding region, which are described at length from Letter XIII to Letter XXV and again in Letter XXXVII.

4. See Letter XXXVII, pp. 315-317 for details about the climate of Nice.

5. *Travels* also provides a very detailed description of the antiquities in Cemenelion or Cemenelium, nowadays known as 'Cimiez', an elegant district of Nice. (Letter XIII, pp. 122-127).

6. [...] "I had a great desire to see the famous monuments of antiquity in and about the ancient city of Nismes [*sic*], which is about eight leagues short of Montpellier" (Letter IX, p. 73).

7. "[...] I am attached to my country, because it is the land of liberty, cleanliness, and convenience [...]" (Letter XLI, p. 341).

8. For example, see the traveller's following remark on his stay in Nîmes: "It must be observed, however, for the honour of French cleanliness, that in the Roman basin, through which this noble stream of water passes, I perceived two washerwomen at work upon children's clout and dirty linnen [*sic*]" (Letter X, p. 83). Interestingly enough, the traveller does not praise the restoration of the baths in Aix-en-Provence, though he describes them in detail in letter XL (see p. 335 in particular). He is among many British travellers who complained of the dirtiness of French people, as Etienne Joliat reminds us in *Smollett et la France* (p. 124): "Horace Walpole, Arthur Young, Mrs. Thrale, Mrs. Montagu, Jos. Palmer, le docteur Burney, tous se plaignirent des odeurs intolérables et des immondices que l'on trouvait partout".

9. "It must be owned that all the peasants who have wine for their ordinary drink, are of a diminutive size, in comparison of those who use milk, beer, or even water; and it is a constant observation, that when there is a scarcity of wine, the common people are always more healthy, than in those seasons when it abounds" (Letter XXXIX, p. 329).

10. Le Chevalier de Chastellux, who wrote a contemporary review of Smollett's *Travels*, went as far as saying that the book had been written "pour servir de préservatif contre cette maladie incompréhensible qui fait sortir tant d'Anglais de leur bienheureuse patrie, qu'ils adorent, pour aller se désennuyer chez ces peuples barbares et frivoles, qu'ils méprisent" (quoted in Joliat E., *Smollett et la France*, p. 149).

11. No fewer than six wars were fought over the period 1688-1815: the Nine Years' War (1688-97), the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713), the War of the Austrian Succession (1739-1748), the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), the War of American Independence (1776-1783), and the French Wars (1793-1815).

12. "Toulon is a considerable place, even exclusive of the basin, docks and arsenal,which indeed are such as justify the remark made by a stranger when he viewed them. The king of France (said he) is greater at Toulon than at Versailles" (Letter XXXIX, p. 329).

13. As he is preparing for his journey back to England, the traveller draws the following conclusion from his stay in Nice, "a place where I leave nothing but the air, which I can possibly regret. The only friendships I have contracted at Nice are with strangers, who, like myself, only sojourn here for a season" (Letter XXXVII, p. 316).

14. "This sort of reserve seems peculiar to the English disposition. When two natives of any other country chance to meet abroad, they run into each other's embrace like old friends even though they have never heard of one another till that moment; whereas two Englishmen in the same situation maintain a mutual reserve and diffidence, and keep without the sphere of each other's attraction, like two bodies endowed with a repulsive power" (Letter XLL, p. 144).

15. "I had purposed to have spent the winter months with my family at Aix, or Marseilles. We have been there, and found Objections to both – to Marseilles especially from the dearness of Living & House rent, which last was so enormous, I could not take the most miserable Appartments under nine or ten Guineas a month – every thing else in proportion [...]" (Sterne Laurence, *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, Letter to Lord Fauconberg, Montpellier, September 30th 1763, pp. 200-201). As a consequence, Sterne stayed in Montpellier and Toulouse.

16. "In Bakhtin's terms, the narrative 'stylizes' the polemical discourse of the angry traveller and so sustains a dialogic tension between Smollett and already existing discourses (on Italy, France, arts, inns, travelling)", (Viviès Jean, *English Travel Narratives in the Eighteenth Century: Exploring Genres*, p. 62).

17. See for instance pp. 286, 295 and 297 *Humphry Clinker* in which the beauties of the "Arcadia of Scotland" or "Scotch Arcadia" are praised by both Matthew Bramble and his niece Lydia Melford.

18. In spite of their differences, both *Travels* and *Humphry Clinker* represent travelling as a way to improve physical and psychological health. As can be seen in Lydia Melford's letter (p. 297) the beauties of the landscape are among the best "remedies" for melancholy, an opinion which is certainly shared by Smollett's traveller through France and Italy.

19. Besides the natural landscapes of Provence, *Travels* also praises the "enchanting" countryside of Burgundy (Letter XIII, p. 121). It is interesting to notice that the adjective "enchanting" is also present in the evocation of rural lanscapes in *Humphry Clinker*, for example, p. 286: "I have seen the Lago di Garda, Albano, De Vico, Bolsena, and Geneva, and, upon my honour, I prefer Lough-Lomond to them all, a preference which is certainly owing to the verdant islands that seem to float upon its surface, affording the most inchanting [*sic*] objects of repose to the excursive view" (Matthew Bramble to Dr. Lewis). The adjective "enchanting" also appears in Lydia Milford's description of Lough Lomond (*Humphry Clinker*, p. 297): "We went accordingly to Lough Lomond, one of the most enchanting spots in the whole world [...]."

20. Commenting on the descriptions of Nice in Smollett's *Travels*, Joliat indicates: "un amour de la nature quelque peu romantique chez ce réaliste endurci du XVIIIe siècle" before qualifying his statement: "Smollett est cependant bien du XVIIIe siècle. Il remarque les fleurs et les douces pentes fleuries, mais ne trouve rien à dire

sur la majesté des hautes cimes des Alpes ou sur la grandeur de la mer" (Joliat, Etienne. *Smollett et la France*, p. 141).

21. There is no mention of Provence in Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) but the region is evoked in the last chapters of *Tristram Shandy*, Book 7, from chapter XLI to chapter XLIII: Tristram stays in "Avignion", [*sic*] then travels to "Baucaira", "Tarascone" [*sic*] and "in the road betwixt Nismes and Lunel" he meets "Nannette" and other joyful peasants.

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