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FRÉDÉRIC OGÉE

Channelling emotions: travel and literary creation in Smollett and Sterne

CROSSING the Channel was one of the favourite activities of the well-off British in the eighteenth century. From the young aristocrat who embarked on his Grand Tour officially to acquire some knowledge of the world and polish his university education under the guidance (some would say with the complicity)¹ of his tutor, to the renowned artist travelling to reap the continental fruit of his labour or the diseased gentleman in search of a more favourable climate to cure his distemper, the journey to the Continent was on the agenda of most eminent Englishmen of the time. And in the second half of the century, hardly had the hostilities of the Seven Years War ceased when small colonies of Englishmen formed again in all the major towns of France on the way to Italy, which received the visit of James Boswell and Edmund Burke, David Garrick and David Hume, Samuel Johnson and Tobias Smollett, Adam Smith and Laurence Sterne, Horace Walpole and John Wilkes, to name only some of the most distinguished. They left an abundant corpus of written impressions in the form of numerous journals, letters, novels, treatises, etc., in which they recorded or narrated their observations and which, when published, contributed to the incredible profusion of travel literature which came off the press in those years.² As the bookseller in letter 2 of *Humphrey Clinker* said: 'There

1. 'It happens too frequently that no other assistance is given [the very young gentleman] than of a person as new as himself to the scene they are entering upon, and much less deserving the style of governor than of companion; [...] not rarely his only superiority is that of years' (John Andrews, *A comparative view of the French and English nations, in their manners, politics and literature*, London 1785, ch.39, p.331).

2. Between the publication of Thomas Nugent's famous *The Grand Tour; or, a journey through the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and France* (1749; numerous reprints) which all British travellers carried with them, and that of Alexander Jardine's *Letters from Barbary, France, Spain, Portugal, etc.* (1788), numerous and bulky books of 'Voyages', 'Travels' or other 'Tours' were written or compiled by Tobias Smollett (1756), Samuel Derrick (1762), John Barrow (1765), John Knox (1767), Samuel Sharp (1767), Philip Thicknesse (1766, 1768), Edward Cavendish Drake (1768), Guiseppe Baretti (1769), Frederick Calvert, Baron Baltimore (1770), none of which achieved the success of the twenty volumes of *The World display'd; or, a curious collection of voyages and travels, selected from the writers of all nations [...] with an introduction by Samuel Johnson* (1759-1761). Samuel Patelson, alias Coriat Junior, burlesqued the genre in his *Another traveller! or, cursory remarks and critical observations made upon a journey through part of the Netherlands in the latter end of the year 1766* (1767-1769).

have been so many letters upon travels lately published [...] the public seems to be cloyed with that kind of entertainment.'

Reading these various accounts today, one cannot fail to wonder at the double paradox that underlies the phenomenon. First, it looks as if the more travel books were published the more they had to be plagiarised, plundered, contradicted, criticised and eventually re-written to generate one of the messiest palimpsests in literary history. Notwithstanding the financial profit which usually accompanied such publications and the fact that a successful travel book was one of the easiest and quickest means to establish one's reputation as a man of letters,³ this sudden outburst of volumes is a sign that different descriptions of the same foreign land – not unlike different renderings of the same mythological subject in painting – became the favourite terrain of comparison and satire, and gave rise to endless philosophical, moral, sociological and, at times also, aesthetic, discussions on the virtues of travel.

The second paradox is found in the strange attraction which France seems to have exercised on British intellectuals. Most travel accounts were written with a view to describing the horrors the future British tourists were to find on the other side of the Channel, and yet the latter all seemed unable to resist the masochistic urge to go beyond Hogarth's *Gate of Calais*⁴ in order to be confirmed in their preconceptions about snails and Catholicism and to reach the foregone conclusion that, as Dr Johnson wrote on his return from France in 1775: 'What I gained by being in France was, learning to be better satisfied with my own country.'⁵ However crudely or satirically they may have been warned by other travellers, Englishmen felt the need to mix with the riff-raff for a while. France, 'that Sweet Enemy', as Sir Philip Sidney had named her, became the new play to damn, and it was fashionable to be seen as one of the damning party. As Smollett wrote in *The Reprisal* (1757) – a farce which he composed with a view to exacerbating anti-Gallic feelings at the outset of the Seven Years War – the only spirit that the British liked in France was a brandy

3. 'The consequent outpouring of narratives became one of the cliché jokes among literary circles' (Thomas M. Curley, *Samuel Johnson and the age of travel*, Athens, Georgia 1976, p.38).

4. Hogarth's famous painting *O the roast beef of Old England: the Gate of Calais* (1748-1749) was his bitter retaliation to his expulsion from France under the accusation of spying. Smollett obviously had it in mind when he wrote the stage directions to act 1, scene 3 of his farce, *The Reprisal* (1757) which was also levelled at the French: 'First the bag-pipe – then a ragged dirty sheet for the French colours – a file of soldiers in tatters – the English prisoners – the plunder, in the midst of which is an English buttock of beef carried on the shoulders of four meagre Frenchmen.' See also Hogarth's related set of two prints called *The Invasion* (1756), and F. Paknadel, 'Hogarth's *Gate of Calais*: myth and reality', above p.7-13.

5. James Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill and L. F. Powell (Oxford 1934-1950), iii.352.

called 'Nantz'.⁶ What James Howell had, a century earlier, in his *Instructions for forreine travels* (1642) attributed to the natural impulse of Islanders ('for they being cut off (as it were) from the rest of the Citizens of the World, have not those obvious accesses [...] to mingle with those more refined Nations, whose Learning and Knowledge did first Urbanize and Polish') became, now that Britain was the economic and political centre of the world, an ever-recurring and heart-warming celebration of the superior degree of British civilisation.

Of course, the craze for things French – especially in matters of dress and gastronomy – was still strong, but this strange attraction for a country which they otherwise found so repulsive (often justifiably so) was already at the time the object of satire. Some newspapers nicknamed it 'The French Disease'⁷ which only homeopathy seemed able to cure.

Among the personalities who contributed to this vogue, the novelists Tobias Smollett and Laurence Sterne played a prominent part. The accounts of their continental ventures in the 1760s epitomise its paradoxical aspects but also reveal a shift in perception which is one of so many manifestations of the transition from the Augustan Age of Reason to that of Sensibility.

No one would probably endeavour to discuss Smollett's and Sterne's works in a comparative study but for the biographical coincidence of their trips to France which, in both cases, nourished their literary creation. What is surprising, in fact, and what I should like to examine here, is the striking difference in the accounts they subsequently wrote of what must have been, but for a few details, very similar journeys on the Continent.

They both made two trips to France. Smollett first went there in 1750 on a *voyage d'agrément* which, as for so many other fashionable Englishmen of the time, fuelled his prejudices about the French. His impressions were then grafted onto the composition of his novel, *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751, chapters 40f.) which he partly wrote there. Among other things the novel is a satire on a reckless young aristocrat's Grand Tour, in which the hero's propensity to behave in a rakish way seems to be encouraged by France and the company of the French.⁸ The novel's representation of the latter is simplistic and only adds a few more caricatures to the already crowded gallery

6. '[Nantz] is the only thing in France that agrees with an Englishman's constitution. Let us drink out their brandy, and then knock out their brains. This is the way to demolish the spirit of the French', in *The Plays and poems written by T. Smollett, M.D., with memoirs of the life and writings of the author* (London 1777), act 11, scene 8, p.180-81.

7. Horace Walpole, letter to Horace Mann, 17 October 1763, *The Yale edition of H. Walpole's correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (New Haven 1960), xxii.175.

8. Eugène Joliat, *Smollett et la France* (Paris 1935), p.85, 108-109.

of ragged and cantankerous French soldiers, potbellied monks or vicious Jesuits. A few years later his above-mentioned play *The Reprisal*, set on board a French ship lying at anchor off the coast of Normandy, has as its protagonist a libidinous and cowardly French Captain called Champignon. The Epilogue to the play sums up in quality verse what must have been the conclusion of many Englishmen of the time:

Aye – now I can with pleasure look around,
Safe as I am, thank heaven, on English ground –
[...] I dread to think what might have come to pass,
Had not the British Lyon quell'd the Gallic ass.⁹

Sterne took his first trip to the Continent in 1762, even before the signing of the Treaty of Paris, in a desperate attempt 'not to be overtaken by *Death*' (*Tristram Shandy*, vii.2). This traveller 'with pale face and clad in black' (*Tristram Shandy*, vii.17) left London very ill and *The London Chronicle* even reported him dead on his arrival in Paris.¹⁰ After six months there, where, unlike Smollett, he was warmly received and celebrated among the Parisian literary circles,¹¹ he and his family moved first to Toulouse and then to Montpellier, where they stayed until 1764. The account of this first trip, which includes his rough crossing of the Channel, makes up volume vii of *Tristram Shandy*. In it, Sterne already exhibits a very idiosyncratic conception of books of travels by, first, denouncing their usual vacuity and superficiality:

'Now before I quit Calais,' a travel-writer would say, 'it would not be amiss to give some account of it.' – Now I think it very much amiss – that a man cannot go quietly through a town, and let it alone, when it does not meddle with him, but that he must be turning about and drawing his pen every kennel he crosses over, merely, o' my conscience, for the sake of drawing it. [ch.4]

– No; – I cannot stop a moment to give the character of the people – their genius – their manners – their customs – their laws – their religion – their government – their manufactures – their commerce – their finances, with all the resources and hidden springs which sustain them: qualified as I may be, by spending three days and two nights amongst them, and during all that time making these things the entire subject of my enquiries and reflections [ch.19]

but also by furthering, through his parody of that kind of literature, his

9. *The Reprisal: or, the tars of Old England*, in *Plays and poems*, p.199.

10. 'Private letters from Paris bring an account of the death of the Rev Mr Sterne, author of *Tristram Shandy*', 2-4 February 1762.

11. 'My head is turned round with what I see, and the unexpected honours I have met with here. Tristram was almost as much known here as in London, at least among your men of condition and learning, and has got me introduced into so many circles ('tis comme à Londres)' (letter to David Garrick, Paris, 31 January 1762, in *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. L. P. Curtis, Oxford 1935, rep. 1967, p.151).

favourite reflection on the status of fictional writing and the reader's reception of it, in a manner which has annoyed so many readers from Dr Johnson and Thackeray onwards.¹² As a matter of fact Sterne, in his narration, alternates between the most accurate and incontestable observations of France and the French (see, for instance, his description of Calais, based on local archives, in chapter 5, or his mapping and Rabelaisian listing of the streets in the several parishes of Paris in chapter 18) and misleading or wrongfooting remarks such as (ch.9):

There is not a town in all France, which in my opinion, looks better in the map than Montreuil; – I own, it does not look so well in the book of post-roads; but when you come to see it – to be sure it looks most pitifully.

There is one thing, however, in it at present very handsome; and that is the inn-keeper's daughter.

or further along:

Now I hate to hear a person, especially if he be a traveller, complain that we do not get on so fast in France as we do in England; whereas we get on much faster, *consideratis considerandis*; thereby always meaning, that if you weigh their vehicles with the mountains of baggage which you lay both before and behind upon them – and then consider their puny horses, with the very little they give them – 'tis a wonder they get on at all.¹³

Volume vii could in fact be considered not only as a satirical and, as it were, intagliated prefiguration of, but also as a theoretical introduction to, the use Sterne will later make of the genre in his *Sentimental journey through France and Italy* to bridge, in a new manner, the gap between the reality of feeling and its two-dimensional literary transposition.

Smollett's second trip to France (and Italy) took place between June 1763 and June 1765, and the two men probably met in Montpellier in 1763. Far from being a *voyage d'agrément* again, it originated in Smollett's sad personal situation and was decided upon for essentially negative reasons. The loss of his cherished daughter Elizabeth the previous April, the severe political blow he had suffered with the failure of the newspaper *The Briton*, which he had edited to support the cause of Lord Bute¹⁴ and above all his ill health¹⁵ which

12. 'He is always looking into my face, watching his effect, uncertain whether I think him an impostor or not; posture-making, coaxing, and imploring me' (W. M. Thackeray, *The Great humourists* (1851), London 1968, p.234).

13. Ch.20. See also the beginning of chapter 18.

14. *The Briton* was published in defence and support of Lord Bute's unpopular ministry, but the latter put an end to the project as it seemed to augment the general disagreement with his policies.

15. 'I am now so thin you would hardly know me. My face is shrivelled up by the asthma like an ill-dried Pippin, and my legs are as thick as the Ance as at the Calf' (*The Letters of Tobias Smollett*, ed. Knapp, London 1970, p.108).

left him little hope of ever coming back to England,¹⁶ all meant that he was going to France reluctantly, ready for the worst and incapable, both physically and mentally, of tolerating the slightest inconvenience. The week's rain which he had to endure when he first arrived in Montpellier in desperate need of a warm, dry climate is just one of those numerous (Shandean?) incidents which seem to have marred his trip from beginning to end. However, aware of the success of travel guidebooks, particularly gallophobic ones, he decided to take notes as he went along, which he then intended to rustle up into a book.¹⁷

Finally Sterne's second trip to France took place in 1765, when he undertook an eight-month tour of France and Italy which, just like Smollett's, served as the basis for a new book.

It is interesting to study the different ways in which the two novelists used the material they had collected in order to write and publish, once back in England, Smollett his *Travels through France and Italy* (1766) and Sterne his *Sentimental journey* (1768). The literary status of Smollett's *Travels* is far from clear, and critics have diverging views as to the real identity of the *persona* who narrates/relates this trip. In any case, it is generally admitted that both writers attempted to recast their notebook impressions and sketches in an artistic mode, and the discrepancy between their biographical impressions (as expressed in their letters home) and the way these are translated into their subsequent work has already been assessed.¹⁸ But a comparison of the first letters of Smollett's *Travels* with the first chapters of Sterne's *Journey*, which pointedly echoes and subverts his predecessor's, signals not only a change in attitude towards France and the French in the late 1760s¹⁹ but also the different conception of travelling as a motif for literary creation which accompanied it.

In February 1760, in the essay written for *The Idler* no.97, echoed by Sterne

16. 'This is my last Stake, and if it does not answer, I must give up all thoughts of ever seeing my Friends in England – when there is no remedy we must submit' (letter 62, Boulogne, 3 Aug. 1763, in *The Letters of Tobias Smollett*, ed. E. S. Noyes, Freeport, New York 1926, repr. 1969, p.85).

17. Smollett was right in his conjecture: there were seven editions of his *Travels*, plus a translation in German, between 1766 and 1768, after which date the book was overshadowed by the phenomenal success of Sterne's.

18. Among many others, on Smollett, see Louis L. Martz, *The Later career of Tobias Smollett* (New Haven 1942), p.68-73; on Sterne, see Wilbur L. Cross, *The Life and times of Laurence Sterne* (New York 1909), p.433-55.

19. A change mediated by Philip Thicknesse's strong rebuttal of Smollett's book, which he nicknamed 'Quarrels through France and Italy for the cure of a pulmonic disorder', and which he attempted to correct in his own *Observations on the customs and manners of the French Nation* (1766) and his *Useful hints to those who make the tour of France* (1768). On the various controversies that arose concerning the veracity of all the travel accounts published then, see Percy G. Adams, *Travelers and travel liars: 1660-1800* (Berkeley 1962).

in the passages quoted above, Dr Johnson voiced his disagreement with the nature of the travel literature that kept pouring off the press:

It may, I think, be justly observed, that few books disappoint their readers more than the narration of travellers. [...] The greater part of travellers tell nothing, because their method of travelling supplies them with nothing to be told. He that enters a town at night and surveys it in the morning, and then hastens away to another place and guesses at the manners of the inhabitants by the entertainment which his inn has afforded him, may please himself for a time with a hasty change of scenes, and a confused remembrance of palaces and churches; he may gratify his eye with a variety of landscapes; and regale his palate with a succession of vintages; but let him be contented to please himself without endeavouring to disturb others. Why should he record excursions by which nothing could be learned, or wish to make a show of knowledge which, without some power of intuition unknown to other mortals, he never could attain?²⁰

The major reason why so many travel books were mediocre, according to Johnson, was that their writers were just not up to the didactic mission which the relation of their journey entailed. For that reason he was vehemently opposed to the educational farce which the Grand Tour of many aristocrats so often turned out to be.²¹

From the Mayflower to *Pilgrim's progress* but also to *Tom Jones*, travelling is, literally as well as metaphorically, a central motif in Christian humanistic values and art, and is traditionally thought to give man the occasion for a journey of self-improvement and moral growth. It was also considered as one of the best ways to avoid the necessarily immoral consequences of inactivity, and Robert Burton's programmatic 'Be not idle' in *The Anatomy of melancholy* was the well known ethical motto of the Christian gentleman.²² But in the middle of the eighteenth century travelling was also an economic and scientific reality, and at a time when the British presence was being extended all over the world, the traveller's mission often became one of systematic enquiry and classification. For Dr Johnson, the principal merit of travelling was precisely the possibility it offered of making valuable comparative studies. The traveller

20. *The Idler*, in *The Yale edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. W. J. Bate and others (New Haven 1963), ii.298-99.

21. 'Time may be employed to more advantage from nineteen to twenty-four almost in any way than in travelling; [...] How little does travelling supply to the conversation of any man who has travelled?', in James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (London 1953), p.995.

22. Travelling as action and progress towards self, truth and, perhaps, death was Hamlet's essential concern: 'Who would fardels bear / To grunt and sweat under a weary life, / But that the dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country from whose bourne / No traveller returns, puzzles the will, / And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of? / Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all; / [...] And enterprises of great pith and moment / With this regard their currents turn awry, / And lose the name of action' (iii, 1).

must have that 'superiority of understanding' which enables him to undertake such a task: 'Books of travels will be good in proportion to what a man has previously in his mind; his knowing what to observe; his power of contrasting one mode of life with another.'²³ Instead of a passive, idle way of travelling, whereby the narrow-minded and self-sufficient traveller went abroad to find the confirmation and illustration of the superficial preconceptions he had read in travel-books written by similar predecessors,²⁴ this scientific age called for a much more systematic and active form of travel the major purpose of which, beyond mere discovery, was an empirical assessment and, perhaps, an epistemological questioning of established values, including ethical and political ones,²⁵ with a view to organising scattered material and, as the initial 'Declaration concerning the business and design of the Royal Society' (1663) phrased it, to recording 'a rational account of the causes of things'.²⁶ The original idea was to find the universal and cosmic order of the world, but the discovery of a multiplicity of orders had gradually encouraged a more relativist conception of man and nature (especially British man and British nature). As Goldsmith wrote in *The Traveller* in 1764 (lines 75-80):

And yet, perhaps, if countries we compare,
And estimate the blessings which they share,
Though patriots flatter, still shall wisdom find
An equal portion dealt to all mankind;
As different good, by Art or Nature given,
To different nations makes their blessing even.

Of course, this new conception of travelling affected the literature that

23. *Life of Johnson*, p.954. Johnson himself, on his only continental venture in 1775, found it difficult to conciliate theory and practice, and his unwillingness to speak French together with the deep-rooted prejudices he had about France prevented him from adopting a different attitude from that of other British travellers. He made very little contact with the French and judged them and their country from quick, superficial glances. In a letter to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, he wrote: 'I shall not perhaps stay here long enough to form a just idea of French manners and characters; tho' this, I believe, would require but little study, as there is no great depth in either' (*The Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, Paris 1837, i.333); and in his notebook he summed up his trip in a doggerel epigram:

A Calais	Arras	Au Mouton
Trop de frais	Hélas!	Rien de Bon.
St Omer	A Amiens	
Tout est cher	On n'a rien	

24. This idle traveller is one of the 'bad travellers' whom Yorick criticises in the Preface he writes in the course of his *Sentimental journey*.

25. The confrontation of Old Europe's ways with those of newly discovered civilisations generated an important body of literature, from Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) to Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759).

26. Quoted in Martz, p.1.

accompanied it. At a time when the Aristotelian bonds that tied art and ethics together had not yet been severed by the emergence of aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical discourse on art, the motif of the journey, of the hero's moral and empirical progress, was predominant in fiction. Homer and Cervantes provided the reference and models, and from Gulliver to Joseph Andrews, from Moll Flanders to Humphrey Clinker, British heroes and heroines had to travel miles in search of self and wisdom.

In that context the travel book, especially when written through the prism of a strong personality, under the form of a diary or letters, enjoyed a privileged status. Ambiguously situated somewhere between reality and fiction, between autobiography and narration, combining scientific and subjective data, its tremendous success is to be attributed to the fact that the spectrum of its potential reading public was correspondingly wide, from the light-headed perusers of adventure stories to the meticulous collector of geographical books.²⁷ The title to the seven-volume collection of travel accounts that Smollett published in 1756, *A compendium of authentic and entertaining voyages, digested in a chronological series*, well expresses this deliberate ambiguity.

When Smollett set out to write his own book of travels, there is no question that he was well aware of the great advantages of the genre. If it is true that Fielding's idea of a travel-book was that of a 'novel without a plot',²⁸ his own *Journal of a voyage to Lisbon* (1755) is unambiguously autobiographical, and death prevented him from re-arranging his material if he ever intended to do so. That the letters which form Smollett's *Travels* were re-written by the author himself after his return from the Continent is known from an oft-quoted letter he wrote to his friend Dr John Moore in which he said: 'The observations I made in the course of my travels through France and Italy I have thrown into a series of letters, which will make two volumes in Octavo' and in letter VIII of the *Travels* itself he made it clear that his reading public was not restricted to the addressee:

I considered all the letters I have hitherto written on the subject of my travels, as written to your society in general, though they have been addressed to one individual of it; and if they contain anything that can either amuse or inform, I desire that henceforth all I send be freely perused by all the members.

Moreover, in combining the ambiguous status of the travel-book with that of the epistolary form (with its essentially contradictory combination of privacy and publication), Smollett could blur even more successfully all labelling or

27. 'Novels like *The Sentimental Journey* or *Humphrey Clinker* occasionally appeared in lists of bona fide travel books' (Thomas Curley, p.38).

28. W. L. Cross, *The History of Henry Fielding* (New Haven 1918), iii.62.

marking of his work and reach the widest audience possible. He also played on his plural identity, as novelist, satirical journalist and doctor of medicine, and was perfectly able to write skilful patchworks of fiction and scientific observation. Narratologists have tried to distinguish between author and narrator in the *Travels* and to present the latter as a caricature of the irascible traveller, quite distinct from Smollett himself, in an attempt to pull the book away from the grip of 'biographists'.²⁹ But for the fact that it confirms the success of Smollett's blurring enterprise, their discussion is often beside the point. An analysis of Smollett's work and a comparison of it with Sterne's are, I think, more rewarding when they bear on the way the two writers used the travel motif and to what purpose.

Traditionally the structure of a journey is circular. The hero, banished from home or led to leave it, for a variety of reasons, undergoes a series of trying adventures which gradually entitle him to regain his integrity, his lost domain, his normality. For both writers the trip to France was neither a Grand Tour nor a character-building experience but first and foremost the desperate quest for better health, and there again the circular pattern is evident. But Smollett's political and personal difficulties which had more or less forced him to leave England made his return even more palatable, and his Tom Jones-like regaining of Britain-Paradise Hall is quite predictably expressed in the last letter of the *Travels*, written in Boulogne:

I am at last in a situation to indulge my view with a sight of Britain, after an absence of two years; and indeed you cannot imagine what pleasure I feel while I survey the white cliffs of Dover, at this distance. [...] I am attached to my country, because it is the land of liberty, cleanliness and convenience: but I love it still more tenderly, as the scene of all my interesting connexions, as the habitation of my friends, for whose conversation, correspondence and esteem, I wish alone to live.

Since its publication critics have noted the Homeric pattern of the *Travels*, which one of the first French reviewers of the book, François de Chastellux, in 1766, underlined with a touch of sarcasm:

C'est l'histoire de son voyage que M. Smollett nous donne ici et qu'il aurait pu intituler son Odissee [*sic*]; car, semblable à Ulysse, il a parcouru bien des villes en observant les mœurs, et il en a eu beaucoup à souffrir parmi les Peuples barbares et mal élevés chez lesquels son mauvais destin l'a forcé de vivre pendant quelque temps. Heureusement il n'a eu à se défendre ni contre le chant des Syrènes, ni contre les enchantements des Circés, ni contre les séductions des Calypsos; il avait avec lui sa Pénélope qui l'a préservé de ces dangers.³⁰

29. See John F. Sena, 'Smollett's persona and the melancholic traveler', *Eighteenth-century studies* 1 (1967-68), p. 353-69; Scott Rice, 'The satiric persona of Smollett's *Travels*', *Studies in Scottish literature* 10 (1972-1973), p. 33-47.

30. F. de Chastellux, *Gazette littéraire de l'Europe*, viii, 15 February 1766.

Beyond the irony, this comment points to two essential traits of the book. First, as we have said, its use of the travel motif as narrative structure. But as in all his other works, Smollett used it much more in the picaresque manner and, as the plural of its title (travels, like adventures) but also the epistolary form suggest, the effect of the book comes from the juxtaposition of contiguous elements whose unity is made possible only by the use of a single, focalised narrative voice, and by the circle which the conjectural return home gradually draws. The texture of the book is composed of long, dense paragraphs which stand next to each other and work cumulatively.

The second element which Chastellux hinted at is to be found behind his reference to Penelope. However anecdotal the allusion to Smollett's wife may be (she is hardly ever referred to in the *Travels*), the critic underlines the fact that Smollett kept away from the various adventures he could have met with in the course of his journey (unlike Yorick who relishes the fact that he finds people are 'pregnant with adventures'). Indeed, what is particularly striking when reading these letters is the isolation of the narrator. We know that Smollett hardly spoke any French and was, unlike Sterne, mortified to discover that his works were barely known in French literary circles.³¹ These two facts must have played an important part in his estrangement from the people he met, and one cannot fail to be struck by the fact that the book, particularly in the first letters, offers very few descriptions of individual people, the streets of Boulogne seem strangely empty and silent, and the observations have an imported flavour. In fact, apart from the passages which Smollett, like many of his contemporaries, plagiarised from other travel books,³² his letters, rewritten as they were on his return, use only the pattern of the travel motif but not its implied progression nor its dynamics. This classical narrative structure is not the literary metaphor of any philosophical, moral or even aesthetic 'progress', but rather, paradoxically, an encouragement to stasis. As the reviewer of the book for the *St James's chronicle* put it: 'In this Paris-loving Age, we will venture to say, [the *Travels*] will not be without their Merit in keeping others at home.'³³ 'At home' geographically, of course, but also mentally, culturally, philosophically, epistemologically.

Smollett's account of France and the French is probably quite accurate and corroborated by numerous other documents (including Sterne's own letters), and the descriptions of French filth and slovenliness or of the exorbitant cost of inns, for instance, are certainly credible. Similarly, as Ken Edward Smith has

31. Eugène Joliat, p. 121.

32. For a detailed study of the question of 'borrowings', see Louis L. Martz, p. 73-87.

33. *St James's chronicle*, 8 May 1766, no. 809.

shown, Smollett's pages on Nice remain one of the most valuable testimonies we have of the Mediterranean coast in the 1760s and, as a letter to his friend Dr John Moore attests, were indeed written for information's sake.³⁴ But that may precisely be why the book as a creative work fails. Smollett's technique is that of most of his contemporaries and consists in piling up generalisations often deduced from the barest evidence (letter VII is a masterpiece of the genre). Smollett's touch is to be found in the often grotesque crudity and tangibility of his descriptions and he treats France with the attitude of the surgeon he was, as if he were in front of a gangrenous limb.³⁵ His diagnosis is quick, his cut sharp. For those of his countrymen who might contract what newspapers called 'the French disease', Dr Smollett's letters from France were indeed meant to have the preventive effect of so many French letters.³⁶

Smollett never manages to see beyond the reality he abhorred and to transmute mere facts into genuine fictional creation³⁷ or to privatise national clichés. However much those letters may have been re-written when he came back to England, they remain strikingly similar to those published as his own correspondence or, for that matter, by other people. The *Travels* he offers literally and metaphorically never invite the reader on a journey for, even if the persona-narrator is distinct from the author, the material remains raw, it is used aimlessly and the book, especially in the beginning, falls somewhere between the would-be scientific opus and the farcical caricature. The necessity to ensure the success of the book, to stick to preconceived opinions, prevented him from leaving the plane of realism to take a boat to Blefuscu.

The beginning of Sterne's *Sentimental journey* is a direct refutation of books like Smollett's. Its famous first sentence – 'They order, said I, this matter better in France' – which has perplexed so many commentators, can first and foremost be read as the straightforward and provocative contradiction of

34. 'As I have given a sort of natural History of Nice, with my remarks upon that climate, and a register of the weather, I hope the Performance may be useful to other valetudinarians who travel for the Recovery of their Health' (*The Letters of Tobias Smollett*, ed. E. S. Noyes, p.96); see also Ken Edward Smith, 'The learned Smelfungus: Tobias Smollett in Nice, 1764-65', *C.A.E.R. XVIII* (Aix-en-Provence 1987), p.219-36.

35. Robert D. Spector sees Smollett's use of sickness and filth as part of a 'moral design' which Spector unconvincingly tries to find in the *Travels* ('Smollett's traveler', in *Tobias Smollett: bicentennial essays presented to Lewis M. Knapp*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and P. G. Boucê, London 1971, p.231-46).

36. In his review of the book Chastellux almost used the same pun when he wrote that the *Travels* had been written 'pour servir de préservatif contre cette maladie incompréhensible qui fait sortir tant d'Anglais de leur bienheureuse patrie'.

37. 'These parts of the *Travels* [the accounts of Boulogne and Nice], admirable as they are in their exactitude and clarity, do not rise to the level of creative writing' (Louis L. Martz, p.147).

Smollett's conclusion. And in the well known Preface to the book, Sterne defines the right and the wrong ways of travelling before introducing himself as the first representative of a new class, that of Sentimental Travellers, and warning his fellow traveller the reader of the 'Novelty of his Vehicle'. I shall not insist on the contents of this oft-quoted Preface but should like to focus instead on the reasons that may have led Sterne to place it well into the book, six chapters after the actual beginning. As a matter of fact, as I have suggested elsewhere,³⁸ it seems that this displacement of the Preface, far from being a mere Shandean joke, plays an important part in Sterne's narrative strategy which is meant to lead the reader towards the new kind of travelling which the book then exemplifies.

One cannot fail to be struck by the difference in tone before and after the Preface. The first page of the book, once Yorick has left England, is a Smollett-sounding diatribe against the King of France and the unfair 'droits d'aubaine', followed by Yorick's altercation with what can only be a hypocritical and money-minded monk, which ends with a violent tirade on the idleness and cupidity of the monastic orders. Just before shutting himself away to write his Preface in a chaise called, quite pointedly, a *Désobligeant*, Yorick thus concludes those first acrid pages: 'I have behaved very ill, said I within myself, but I have only just set upon my travels, and will learn better manners as I get along.'³⁹ He then concludes the Preface by symbolically refusing to converse with two of his compatriots ('As an Englishman does not travel to see Englishmen'). After the Preface the anonymous monk whom he had put off becomes 'Good old Father Lorenzo' and they swap their snuff-boxes. The Preface thus plays a corrective role, steering the book away from becoming yet another catalogue of sarcastic and condescending remarks.

Philip Thicknesse, in the two books on France he wrote between the publication of Smollett's *Travels* and that of Sterne's *Journey (Observations on the customs and manners of the French nation - 1766; Useful hints to those who make the tour of France - 1768)* had attempted, in often abusive language, to correct the factual errors which he had found in Smollett's book, but Sterne challenges the very spirit of the *Travels* and the intentions of its author. The satirical parody of the first chapters, past the corrective Preface, quickly gives way to a literary and philosophical reflection on the virtues of the kind of travelling, particularly that of the heart and of the mind, which creative fiction

38. Frédéric Ogée, 'This matter? Better in France? Laurence Sterne et le voyage sentimental', in *Le Continent européen et le monde anglo-américain aux XVII et XVIII siècles* (Reims 1987), p.8.

39. Laurence Sterne, *A sentimental journey through France and Italy*, edited with introductions by Ian Jack (Oxford 1968), p.8. All references to this edition.

makes possible. The first pages of the book can retrospectively be read as a criticism of traditionally ethnocentric travel books. The snuff-boxes scene inaugurates a series of similar sentimental 'moments' which travelling abroad makes possible and in which the emphasis is on the notion of exchange, not only of currency and words, but also of glances and gestures, crowned by the Fragonard-like holding of hands at the end of the book.

As I have said, Sterne was certainly more familiar with the French language than Smollett ('I splutter French so as to be understood'),⁴⁰ and his enormous success in Paris certainly made things considerably more pleasant for him. Yet, as can be read in his letters, he suffered as much as Smollett from the numerous inconveniences that attended the traveller in France at the time: 'We were eat up at night by bugs, and other unswept out vermin, the legal inhabitants (if length of possession gives right) of every inn we lay at. [...] To mend the matter, my two postillions were two dough-hearted fools, and fell a crying' (p.182-83). But a letter from Sterne's daughter Lydia to John Wilkes shows that, even in the worst circumstances, the Sterne household had Smollett's negative reaction in mind and tried to adopt a different attitude (p.450):

Now as to our journey nothing either agreeable in it or diverting I promise you. A journey thro' France (that is to say the posting part of it), I am sure, cannot be a sentimental one; for it is one continual squabble with Innkeepers and postillions. Yet not like Smelfungus who never kept his temper, but we kept ours and laugh'd whilst we scolded.

The originality of Sterne's enterprise has been to transform his observations and often painful experience of the difficulties of travelling into a reflection on the existential vicissitudes of the individual traveller in his journey through life, and to offer the precarious but precious relief of art to transcend them. As Martin Battestin has well shown, the novel makes use of numerous metaphorical obstacles (closed doors, drawn curtains, locked portmanteau, buttoned-up pockets, the prison, the cage, even the Alps between France and Italy) to underline the several separations which exist between men and which are often the result of our solipsistic tendencies.⁴¹ All these obstacles emphasise the difficulties that human beings experience when trying to communicate, and among them the linguistic barrier is undoubtedly one of the most salient.

Throughout his two novels Sterne, who had read Locke, permanently staged the absurdity and incoherence of linguistic exchanges and the difficulties of

40. *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, p.178.

41. Martin C. Battestin, 'A sentimental journey and the syntax of things', in *Augustan worlds*, ed. J. C. Hilson, M. M. B. Jones and J. R. Watson (Leicester 1978), p.223-39.

reaching real communications. Travelling abroad makes communication with the same words immediately and preconditionally impossible. But paradoxically Sterne sees this as an advantage since the ignorance of the vernacular takes the traveller back to a sort of pre-linguistic condition, endowing him with a freshness of perception which allows him to explore other modes of communication. The exchange of the snuff-boxes, happening as it does just after Yorick has refused to talk to other Englishmen, is the beginning of that exploration. Yorick elaborates a new syntax made of secret looks and sketched gestures, of the 'ebbs and flows' of circumstantial scenes. Only when heedful to such signs can one become a sentimental traveller, as Yorick concludes at the end of the book (p.107):

The man who either disdains or fears to walk up a dark entry may be an excellent good man, and fit for a hundred things; but he will not do to make a good sentimental traveller. I count little of the many things I see pass at broad noon-day in large and open streets. Nature is shy, and hates to act before spectators; but in such an unobserved corner, you sometimes see a single short scene of hers worth all the sentiments of a dozen French plays compounded together, and yet they are absolutely fine.

This attention to the non-verbal signs is the sentimental traveller's mission. Yorick's book is a succession of short, fleeting scenes in which what is left unspoken is compensated by so many 'inflections and delineations of looks and limbs': 'There are certain combined looks of simple subtlety where whim and sense and seriousness and nonsense are so blended that all the languages of Babel set loose together could not express them. I leave it to your men of words to swell pages about it' (p.55). Unlike Smollett's thick, rough paragraphs and clusters of words, Sterne's elusive chapters are written in a subtle, allusive prose which follows the rhythm of the narrator's pulse and accompanies the essential fugacity of those precious moments of exchange.

Sterne's *Sentimental journey* is therefore, like so many other travel books, didactic in its purpose but not, like them, in the first degree. The use of the singular word 'Journey' in the title already signals Sterne's intention to come back to the very concept of travelling as a spiritual experience. As he defines his book himself: 'Tis a quiet journey of the heart in pursuit of Nature, and those affections which arise out of her, which make us love each other – and the world, better than we do' (p.84-85). Sterne promotes the idea of a book meant to facilitate this pursuit, whereas Smollett's only ended in consolidating the obstacles to it. *A sentimental journey* is not so much a book of fiction as a book on fiction, in which travelling becomes a synonym of reading, a conversational journey of the reader's heart in Sterne's new 'Vehicle'. The viciously circular motif of travel is here opened up, and the book, far from being unfinished, is primarily infinite.

If the anonymous narrator of the *Travels* is indeed distinct from the author and thereby, as John F. Sena has put it, 'the attitudes expressed and the events described become partially objectified', that is precisely where the major difference from Sterne's book lies. Smollett uses all the advantages of the genre (travel motif, success of guidebooks, of epistolary novels, ambiguity between reality and fiction, a sort of programmatic verisimilitude) whereas Sterne raises the notion of journey to use it as the metaphor of artistic creation in which subjectivity and intimacy, as opposed to pseudo-scientific objectivity, are celebrated. Smollett's work belongs to the Augustan age of reason and order, in which French disorder only stands as a foil to British sound values, whereas Sterne's, written only a few years later, is the prefiguration of a later era whose anguish and interrogations momentarily find refuge in transient bursts of sensibility, in sentimental epiphanies.