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Hume, Smollett and Bad Taste

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The question of taste in general is so central in the eighteenth century that the temptation of probing into its provocative correlative, the notion of 'bad taste,' could barely be resisted by anyone interested in that period. As I hope to be able to make clear, it is almost impossible to tackle the notion of 'bad taste' without beginning to tread on the slippery ground of popular culture, albeit in a roundabout, peripheral way. Although the two authors studied here – David Hume and Tobias Smollett – can hardly be thought of as either representatives or exponents of 'popular culture' in their time, I will suggest that the latter, by allowing elements of 'bad taste' to contaminate his work, contributed to some extent to the partial 'popularisation' of literature.

In his last novel, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), Tobias Smollett humorously contrasts Matthew Bramble's appraisal of the city of Bath with his niece Lydia Melford's. The former 'finds nothing but disappointment at Bath' which has become 'the very center of racket and dissipation' (*HC*, 34). Not only does Mat Bramble deplore the lack of 'peace, tranquillity and ease' at Bath, but he is also very critical of its design, style and architecture:

> The Circus is a pretty bauble; contrived for shew, and looks like Vaspasian's amphitheatre turned outside in. If we consider it in point of magnificence, the great number of small doors belonging to the separate houses, the inconsiderable height of 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… (HC, 34-5)

Not even the population of Bath, infected as it is with 'the general tide of luxury, which hath overspread the nation, and swept away all' (*HC*, 36), finds favour with him:

> Knowing no other criterion of greatness, but the ostentation of wealth, they discharge their affluence without taste or conduct, through every channel of the most absurd extravagance; and all of them hurry to Bath, because here, without any further qualification, they can mingle with the princes and nobles of the land… (*HC*, 37)

For Mat Bramble the question of taste is obviously a matter of class distinction and Bath appears to him precisely as a place of intolerable social mix. By opposition, his niece Lydia is truly enamoured with the city, which she finds both beautiful and exciting:

> Bath to me is a new world – All is gaiety, good-humour, and diversion. The eye is continually entertained with the splendour of dress and equipage; and the ear with the sound of coaches, chaises, chairs, and other carriages… the noise of the musick playing in the gallery [at the Pump room], the heat and flavour of such a crowd, and the hum and buz of their conversation, gave me the head-ach and vertigo the first day; but afterwards, all these things became familiar, and even agreeable. (HC, 39)

The noise and agitation, which are the very first cause of her uncle's uneasiness, are precisely what she finds particularly pleasing and she approves of what is to him the very mark of bad taste.

From the literary point of view, what is noteworthy is that Smollett, resorting to the epistolary mode as he does in *Humphry Clinker*, does not explicitly tell the reader whose taste is good, nor whose is bad. The very same places, people or situations are presented as being capable of being appraised in radically opposite ways. Taste, we are led to understand, does not rely in things themselves but in the way men look upon them. It is interesting to observe that this is precisely in accordance with the judgment passed by David Hume, Smollett's countryman and contemporary for whom the latter professed great admiration: 'Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty', Hume wrote (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 230). It would seem, then, that Hume and Smollett were of the same opinion as to the relativity of taste. As we shall see, however, Hume's crucial essay on 'The Standard of Taste' (1757) is more complex than it would seem at first sight. It proceeds in a paradoxical, dialectical, almost contradictory way and ends up by showing that there *is*, in fact, such a thing as a proper standard of taste. The question may be asked, therefore, whether the same double-barrelled reasoning applies to Smollett's fiction. Another question – linked to the former – has to do with Smollett's general tendency deliberately to let 'bad taste' invade his narratives. In the nineteenth century, the Victorians dismissed him precisely on account of the coarseness, low tone and vulgar scenes in his novels and – beyond the obvious question of the arbitrary value judgment that such accusations raise – one may wonder what function such deliberate 'bad taste' plays in Smollett's writings. Taking his first novel, *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), as an example, we shall therefore try to show that 'bad taste' plays a crucial structural part in Smollett's provocative strategy to assert, *a contrario*, his belief in the ethical necessity of abiding by a socially-defined standard of taste. Language, as we shall see, is one of the key issues on which Smollett's satire hinges and the ultimate means whereby good and bad taste can be ascertained or exposed.

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In his essay on 'The Standard of Taste,' David Hume first acknowledges the 'great variety of Taste' that 'prevails in the world' (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 226). He remarks that, whenever our own taste does not accord with another person's, we tend to pass a negative judgement on the latter, while, conversely, our own taste is similarly rejected by those that do not share it: 'We are apt to call *barbarous* whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension: But soon find the epithet of reproach retorted on us' (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 227). Seen in such a light, bad taste simply means whatever does not correspond to our own taste. In matters of taste, it seems almost impossible to prove rationally the superiority of one given set of values over another one. Hume makes a clear distinction between judgment and sentiment:

> All sentiment is right, because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself. But all determinations of the understanding are not right, because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact; and are not always conformable to that standard.' (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 230)

In Hume's philosophical system, sentiment and impressions have precedence over reason and ideas. Whatever we feel and perceive is as it were inescapable – it imposes itself upon us – but it does not imply that what we perceive leads us to a proper understanding thereof. Thus, we know what we find right, beautiful and good, but there does not follow automatically that we can really account for such an impression. Consequently, in Hume's philosophically subjective and unstable world it is impossible to justify, or 'prove,' what is in good or bad taste – all the more so as language itself is misleading since people '[affix] a very different meaning to their expressions' (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 227).

We may find a satirical illustration of that theory of the relativity of taste in Smollett's first novel, *The Adventures of Roderick Random*. The interpolated 'Melopoyn' story in chapters lxii and lxiii is a good example. While a prisoner at the Marshalsea because of his debts, Roderick meets the playwright Melopoyn who has not succeeded in having his tragedy put on the stage and has finally been reduced to poverty and seized for debts. Although the passage is mainly intended as a charge against those who control the stage after Smollett's own tragedy, *The Regicide*, was rejected by John Rich in 1746, it also shows how differently all those who read Melopoyn's tragedy react to it. When he reads the play, Roderick admires it:

> The fable, in my opinion, was well chosen, and naturally conducted, the incidents interesting, the characters beautifully contrasted, strongly marked, and well supported; the idction poetical, spirited and correct; the unities of the drama maintained with the most scrupulous exactness; the opening gradual and engaging, the Peripeteia surprizing, and the catastrophe affecting: in short, I judged it by the laws of Aristotle and Horace, and could find nothing in it expectionable, but a little too much embellishment in some few places... (*RR*, lxii, 378)

Tellingly, Roderick accompanies his assessment of the play with the phrase 'in my opinion.' And indeed, Melopoyn explains that, successively, all the people to whom he showed his tragedy asked for alterations to it, either because 'his language was too high flown, and of consequence not at all adapted to the capacity of [the] customers' (*RR*, lxii, 385), or because changes were 'necessary for the *jeu de theatre*' (*RR*, lxiii, 392), etc. Judgment, we understand, is entirely subjective and those that profess to know better actually drive Melopoyn to 'humble [his] stile to the comprehension of vulgar readers' (*RR*, lxii, 385). Beyond the denunciation of the opacity of the rules that govern the world of stage-managers, patrons and actors, what the episode highlights is the fragility and instability of taste and the fact that what is deemed acceptable to some may be the acme of bad taste to others.

After such premises as those formulated by Hume in his essay, one would expect the very idea of a proper 'standard' of taste acceptable by all men to be

dismissed altogether: how indeed could people agree on one and the same standard for something as fundamentally subjective and fluctuating as Hume seems to assert taste to be? However, he remarks:

> It is natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another. (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 229)

Thus, although common sense knows that it is a fruitless enquiry 'to seek the real beauty, or real deformity' of an object, 'there is a certainly a species of common sense which … serves to modify and restrain' such an axiom (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 230). To make his point, Hume famously explains that

> whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 230-31)

This does not mean that it is impossible to have a *preference* for Ogilby instead of Milton – or for, say, Madonna rather than Beethoven – since matters of taste are personal, but it simply means that such a preference would appear 'absurd and ridiculous' to educated people and, consequently, that there is no such thing as an equality of tastes. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume explained that he found himself 'utterly abandon'd and disconsolate' because of his philosophical scepticism, yet 'fortunately that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures [him] of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of [hid] senses, which obliterate all these chimeras.' And, he went on,

> I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (Hume, *Treatise*, I, iv, *vii*, 175).

In the same way, through a similar dialectic somersault, Hume asserts that although reason cannot vindicate taste, a general agreement as to what 'good taste' consists in is nonetheless reached in actual facts. The social experience solves the dilemma into which pure rational enquiry may leave us stranded. Beyond the relativity of individual tastes, there are indisputable differences between objects, which have been consecrated by good sense, that is to say, by experience, in the course of time. Taste would then consist in the reconciliation of judgment with sentiment. For Hume good taste depends upon one's ability to grasp spontaneously, or as if it were 'naturally,' the beauties sanctioned by 'the common sentiments of human nature' (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 232). Conversely, it has nothing to do with a blind adhesion to the rules of art since 'to check the sallies of the imagination, would be the most contrary to the laws of criticism' (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 231).

Hume's theory of good taste is profoundly elitist. Only the man who has what Hume calls 'delicacy of imagination' (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 234) and is conversant with the best works the greatest masters is qualified to give his judgment on any work of art:

> Thus, though the principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty. (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 241)

If good taste is a sign of social distinction, then conversely bad taste is a mark of exclusion from polite society. It is the taste of people without that culturally acquired delicacy of imagination that is a requisite to form acceptable aesthetic judgment. Delicacy of taste, Hume explains in his essay on 'Delicacy of Taste' (1740-41), 'makes us sensible to pains as well as pleasures, which escape the rest of

mankind' (Hume, Delicacy of Taste, 5) and 'a fine taste is, in some measure, the same with strong sense, or at least depends so much upon it, that they are inseparable' (Hume, 'Delicacy of Taste,' 6). Thus, logically, the majority of mankind have bad taste. As a consequence, Hume recommends 'the study of the beauties, either of poetry, eloquence, music, or painting' which 'give a certain elegance of sentiment to which the rest of mankind are strangers:'

> The emotions they excite are soft and tender. They draw off the mind from the hurry of business and interest; cherish reflection; dispose to tranquillity; and produce an agreeable melancholy, which, of all dispositions of the mind, is the best suited to love and friendship. In the second place, a delicacy of taste is favourable to love and friendship, by confining our choice to few people, and making us indifferent to the company and conversation of the greater part of men…. One that has well digested his knowledge both of books and men, has little enjoyment but in the company of a few select companions. He feels too sensibly, how much all the rest of mankind fall short of the notions which he has entertained.' (Hume, 'Delicacy of Taste,' 6-7)

Thus, Hume's theory of taste, starting as it does from a sceptical acknowledgment of the relativity of all tastes, eventually opens out onto a kind of social mapping, the purpose of which is to distinguish the few 'men of delicate taste' who, thanks to the 'soundness of their understanding' and 'the superiority of their faculties' are set 'above the rest of mankind.' (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 243). Let us observe that the trajectory of Hume's essay is as it were circular. Peter Kivy describes it as 'a vicious circle whereby good art is defined in terms of the good critic and the good critic in terms of good art' (Kivy, 60). After a series of repetitions, Hume falls back upon the very terms that he seems to have been rejecting. David Marshall comments:

> Although the variety of taste strikes him as obvious and he argues emphatically that tastes are not equal, in his argument both the general rules of beauty and the decisions of judges that would set the standard

> of taste are authorized by various acts of universal agreement. In other words, the uncertainty that Hume seeks to extricate himself from is uncertainty itself (Marshall, 328)

Turning now again to Smollett, we may try to see to what extent Hume's theory of taste can be said to be expressed and validated in that strikingly 'low' narrative which seems indeed to be bereft of that 'delicacy of taste' held dear by the Scottish philosopher.

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The Adventures of Roderick Random is crammed with coarse, crude scenes of all kinds: violence predominates in numerous fights and duels; there are disgusting descriptions of unhealthy surroundings, misery and illness; vulgar scatological farce is never far off; and language itself is the victim of twists and tortures of the worst kind. The reader's senses – sight, smell, taste, hearing – are constantly aroused and solicited to bear witness to a dreadful, sordid reality in which bad taste is the dominant rule. The famous '*Thunder*' episode, in particular, depicts a microcosm – the ship – in which all the rules of justice, humanity, decency, and charity are systematically trampled upon. Seemingly with relish, Smollett spares the reader no detail in the depiction of rotten food, urine buckets overturned by accident (*RR*, xxvi, 150) or on purpose (*RR*, xiv, 68), physical hardship of all kinds, the ravages of an epidemic and the succession of horrific deaths. Not surprisingly, then, 'it has long been fashionable for critics to purse their thin academic lips at Smollett's supposed coarseness and indecency', Paul-Gabriel Boucé remarks before quoting this statement by some anonymous eighteenth-century scholar:

> I cannot read Smollett anymore… For no reason at all people are hurt and humiliated, even skinned; even those who help him to perpetrate fun. Jokes about hunchbacked people and lame matrons. Pissing for no reason at all… Can you really call him a novelist of amusement? Can

> you honestly say there is a moment of pleasure in the whole of Smollett? (Boucé 1979, xxiii)

Although *Roderick Random* is not a picaresque novel proper but a modified form of it, the elements of lowliness to be found in Smollett's work can undoubtedly be linked to that literary tradition in which, as Walter Reed noted, 'the [picaresque] emphasis on the lowliness of men is a response to the literary assertion of man's dignity' (Reed). From the very beginning of the story, Roderick is cast out and forced to fend for himself in a hostile world. The fact that he should be rejected and disinherited by his grand-father forces him out into a long exile that leads him to London, then abroad to Cartagena and France before he can eventually be restored in his rights and fortune at the end of the story. It is in the course of that confrontation with the outside world that Roderick and his friend the barber Strap come up against various manifestations of coarseness and bad taste. What is interesting, however, is that neither Roderick nor Strap remains aloof as a mere critical observer and judge of the lack of delicacy in others. They too partake of it. The descent into the underworld of poverty, destitution and corruption that is part and parcel of the necessary learning process with which the protagonist must engage implies his being himself a vehicle of bad taste. If the novel makes for coarse reading, then, it is because its main characters experience that coarseness firsthand.

What is clearly at stake, then, is the question of bad taste. What makes it hard for some readers to accept the book is its constant harping upon the least savoury aspects of life. As Boucé as been at pains to show, however, it would be an error to infer from some similarities between the narrative of *Roderick Random* and Smollett's own life that the story is autobiographical (Boucé 1976, 67) or, for that matter, that the elements of bad taste present in the novel reflect on Smollett's own taste. Contemporary accounts of Smollett show that he 'was a man of very agreeable conversation and of much genuine humour' (Carlyle, 278). His friend Carlyle reported an evening spent in Smollett's company:

> We passed a very pleasant and joyous evening. When we broke up, Robertson expressed great surprise at the polished and agreeable

> manners and the great urbanity of [Smollett's] conversation. He had imagined that a man's manners must bear a likeness to his books, and as Smollett had described so well the characters of ruffians and profligates, that he must, of course, resemble them. (Carlyle, 356)

It is interesting to see that Smollett himself, writing in the *Critical Review*, took issue with a writer in whose work there was 'a great deal of tinsel and frippery without taste, much declamation and no nature' and blamed his 'crude fancy' (*Critical Review* 1756, 92) arguing that 'the sole merit it can have in the eyes of any reader is a dash of obscenity, with which all the *French* authors of this class take care to season their productions' (*ibid*., 93). In another article of the *Critical Review*, Smollett clearly explained the difference between the scenes selected from real life and the moral use an author may make of them:

> Provided the author takes nature for his guide, and has taste enough to select her most agreeable attitudes, he needs not fear going astray. We say, taste enough to regulate his choice, because it is possible to be very natural and very insipid, to be very natural and very shocking. A man may paint a hogstye, or a dunghill very naturally, without giving pleasure to the spectator; and describe with scrupulous exactness many scenes and incidents that produce nothing but yawning and disgust. It is the happy faculty of genius to strike off glowing images, to seize the ridicule of character, to contrive incidents that shall engage the passions and affections of the reader, to support the spirit of the dialogue, and animate the whole narration. It is the province of taste to regulate the morals of the piece, to conduct the thread of the story, to make choice of airs and attitudes, to avoid impropriety, to reject every thing that is extravagant, unnatural, mean, and disagreeable. (*Critical Review* 1763, 13)

Thus it can be argued that bad taste is overwhelmingly present in a great many episodes of *Roderick Random* only as a deliberate, meaningful strategy to shock the reader and challenge the orthodoxy of taste and gentility in a society that propounded these values. Smollett was manifestly interested in the depiction of life

as it is, not in some idealised representation of a sanitised world – with the exception of the conclusive chapters, as we shall see – but his aim was moral reform through satirical means. Smollett does not condone the coarseness of the world which his protagonists inhabit. Structurally speaking, Roderick eventually veers away from the lowliness and bad taste with which he is initially confronted, towards greater refinement and taste. What Smollett proposes, we may argue, is a deliberate aesthetic of bad taste aiming at showing the ethical merit of good taste. Such a dialectic procedure may be said to be at the very core of what Cedric Watts has called the 'Janiform novel' (Watts, 40) – that is, a two-faced narrative in which, as Boucé has deftly shown, 'the young author, himself both repelled and fascinated by the rampant corruption and violence of the contemporary scene, despite his careful but conventional show of scrupulous moral didacticism, actually displays nearly constant duplicity and moral paradoxicality' (Boucé 1979, xvii).

The episode in which Roderick is introduced to Narcissa's aunt is particularly interesting as far as the question of bad taste is concerned, all the more so as the lady in question does not belong to the class of ruffians, harlots and semi-illiterate, vulgar types that cram the pages of the novel. Not only is she Narcissa's relative, but she is also apparently well-read and is a poet in her own right. When he first discovers her study in her absence, Roderick has a look at all her books and 'scraps of her own poetry' (*RR*, xxxix, 220) and he reports scrupulously what he sees:

> … But what was extraordinary in a female poet, there was not the least mention made of love in any of her performances. – I counted fragments of five tragedies, the titles of which were, 'The Stern Philosopher. – The Double Murder. – The Sacrilegious Traitor. – The Fall of Lucifer; - And the Last Day.'… Her library was composed of the best English historians, poets, and philosophers; of all the French criticks and poets, and of a few books in Italian, chiefly poetry, at the head of which were Tasso and Ariosto, pretty much used. – Besides these, translations of the classicks into French, but not one book in Greek or Latin; a circumstance that discovered her ignorance of these languages. (*RR*, xxxix, 221)

Although Narcissa's aunt is clearly not ignorant, the catalogue of both her own writings and the contents of her library fulfils here a critical function to indicate what is *wrong* with her taste. Roderick's implicit censure has to do firstly with the fact that his mistress does not share the natural preoccupations of the female sex. The titles of her tragedies indicate an interest for serious, high-minded philosophical subjects that a lady of taste should not heed. Moreover, her ignorance of Greek and Latin – which was quite normal for a woman at the time – is at odds with her pretence at writing such tragedies as the ones she has embarked on. Of course, Roderick, who explains that 'above all things, [he] valued [him]self on [his] taste in the *Belle Lettre*, and a talent for poetry, which had already produced some morceaux, that brought [him] a great deal of reputation' (RR, vi, 20) is a proper judge of good taste in writing and would never commit such inconsistent errors. Whichever way one looks at her interest and achievement, therefore, Narcissa's aunt is presented as being *unnatural*. This is soon confirmed by what we learn of her strange behaviour: she has such 'unaccountable imagination' that she sometimes 'fanc[ies] herself an animal,' scratching 'her face in a terrible manner' or 'squat[ting] on her hams… in the manner of a puss when she listens to the cries of her pursuers.' Smollett cannot resist the temptation of indulging in a crude scene when Roderick explains that the lady in question might have died of retention, had she not been induced by a bonfire kindled under her chamber window to 'discharge the cause of her distemper' into a bucket.

This episode admirably encapsulates the ambivalence of Smollett's treatment of the question of bad taste. On the one hand, Narcissa's aunt is exposed as someone whose taste is perverted, which obviously suggests to the reader what good taste does consist in. On the other hand, however, the character's bad taste contaminates the text itself, as the visible signs of the lady's own lack of delicacy must be represented. For all its reforming import, the picture of bad taste makes for shocking reading and threatens the very 'delicacy' of the author's own production.

The same applies to language. One of the distinctive marks of Smollett's manner is his ability to transcribe the way his characters express themselves, in particular regional accents, by distorting the spelling of the words and resorting to 'comic polysemy' (Boucé 1979, 444). It has a moral implication, as the distortion of

correct English into incoherent 'jargon' can be seen as a reflection on the character's education, lack of taste or social position. Jean Dixsaut has rightly remarked that 'Smollett explicitly connects dissonance with jargon as two forms of the unbearable, the one to the ear and the other, the unintelligible one, unbearable to the mind…' (Dixsaut, *s.p.*). In the hilarious conversation between Mr. Medlar and Dr. Wagtail on the proper spelling of the word 'custard,' the word 'jargon' is used by Smollett in conjunction with the notion of 'propriety':

> we found Mr. Medlar and Dr. Wagtail disputing upon the word Custard, which the physician affirmed should be spelt with a G, observing that it was derived from the Latin verb gustare, 'to taste;' but Medlar pleaded custom in behalf of C, observing, that, by the Doctor's rule, we ought to change pudding into budding, because it is derived from the French word boudin; and in that case why not retain the original orthography and pronunciation of all the foreign words we have adopted, by which means our language would become a dissonant jargon without standard or propriety. (*RR*, xlviii, 286)

Verbal 'dissonances' testify therefore to a lack of education, propriety, decorum – taste, in one word – on the part of those that do not use language properly, as instanced by the letter written by 'Clayrender' to Jackson:

> Dire creatur,
> As you are the animable hopjack of my contempleshuns, your aydear is constantanously skimming before my kimmerical fansie, when morfeus sheds illeusinary puppies upon the I's of dreeming mortels; and when lustroos febus shines from his kotidian throne: Whereupon I shall consceif old whorie time has lost his pinners, as also cubit his harrows, until thou enjoy sweet slumbrs in the lovesick harrums of thy very faithful to commend 'till death.
> 'Vinegar-yard Droory lane, 'Clayrender'
> January 12th. (*RR*, xvi, 81)

As Dixsaut stresses, 'what was clear to the average decent Londoner of Smollett's day, is that the writer of such a letter should be kept at arm's length because the letter is all wrong; it is all wrong because it sounds all wrong, and its recipient clearly has no ear at all' (Dixsaut, *s.p.*). Bad spelling is to the text what a dreadful accent, or an awful noise is to the ear, and all of these are unacceptable signs of social inferiority or moral decadence, as the educated reader would of course have immediately realised. Incorrect speech thus plays a distinct role as a social and moral marker since it reveals what belongs to an obscure, inferior world of disorder and dubious behaviour, as opposed to the world of polite, tasteful and decent society that conforms to acceptable standards of expression. Thus, even though no amount of reasoning may prove what good or bad taste consists in, as we have seen Hume explained, bad taste does manifest itself inevitably and is let for every person with a proper 'delicacy of imagination' to spot and identify.

Paradoxically, however, the trace of such vulgar, low-class jargon must make its way into Smollett's text and it necessarily pulls it as it were away from the desirable 'delicacy' of style that should ideally characterize the work of a writer of taste. The very exemplification of bad taste in the texture of the narrative testifies to that fall from Eden and that 'lowering of the gaze' (Roston, 101) that are inextricably bound up with the genre of the novel and which, interestingly, seems to have been implicitly acknowledged by David Hume himself. Hume conceded that, notwithstanding all our efforts to fix a standard of taste, there are still two sources of variation which render the diversity of tastes unavoidable: first, the 'different humours of particular men' and secondly, 'the particular manners and opinions of our age and country' (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 243). The latter, he explained, is the reason why

> we are more pleased, in the course of our reading, with pictures and characters, that resemble objects which are found in our own age and country, than with those which describe a different set of customs. It is not without some effort, that we reconcile ourselves to the simplicity of ancient manners, and behold princesses carrying water from the spring,

> and kings and heroes dressing their own victuals. (Hume, 'Standard of Taste,' 244-5)

Hume justified here the rise of the genre of the novel – as opposed to the romance – in the course of the eighteenth century – a genre, that is, 'with pictures and characters, that resemble objects which are found in our own age and country.' Delicacy of taste, we are led to understand, does not preclude the representation of contemporary reality, with the paradoxical difficulty that the latter may abound in instances of bad taste! Thus, paradoxically, Smollett's social and ethical project, intended as it was for the learned, delicate reader, let itself be as it were infected, contaminated or tainted by 'low' elements clearly belonging to the realm of popular culture.

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If Narcissa's aunt is synonymous with bad taste, as we have seen, Narcissa herself, by contrast, stands for the most perfect kind of taste. More than a flesh and blood character, she is the projection and embodiment of Roderick's own, finally acquired 'delicacy of imagination.' She is the one who can soothe her aunt by playing the harpsichord and singing when the latter is agitated, she is a model of beauty, decency, restraint, elegance and beauty. As has been argued elsewhere, 'what 'is at stake in the concluding chapters of *Roderick Random* is nothing short of an ironical reflection on the very nature of fiction' since the happy, unrealistic conclusion of the novel 'hardly corresponds to the representation of the moral depravation that dominates in the "real" world, as Smollett has been at pains to demonstrate in the forerunning chapters of the book' (Dubois, 397) and it 'represents a degree of wish fulfilment' (Daiches, 118, quoted in Boucé 1979, xxi). The real world is coarse and corrupt while in the end Narcissa and Roderick are eventually joined in a mythical, providential conclusion that ironically asserts its very implausibility, for, as Aileen Douglas has pointed out, the brutality of society and the harsh reality of the world denounced by Smollett have not changed (Douglas, 66).

After Roderick has eventually enjoyed his honeymoon with Narcissa, he declares that he 'found her – O heav'n and earth! A feast, thousand times more delicious than my most sanguine hopes presaged!' (*RR*, lxviii, 430). The gastronomic metaphor – which, as Boucé remarked 'connotes the reification of Narcissa into a mere tasty morsel' (Boucé 1979, xxii) – shows the extent to which 'good taste' works in that ideological construct of Smollett's and Hume's as both a mark of social excellence, and the reward for it: Narcissa's good taste renders her particularly delicious to Roderick's own palate. It does not matter that the rest of the novel was full of coarse, crude matter: order is finally restored when Roderick proves at last worthy of the paragon of good taste he has fallen in love with. After the low point of his descent into despondency and slovenliness in jail (lxiv, 397), Roderick eventually manages a definitive reconciliation with good taste which arbitrarily and unrealistically puts a final end to the aesthetic of bad taste that has dominated the narrative.

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We have argued that Hume and Smollett can be thought to approach the question of taste in a similar manner: they both insist on the variety of tastes and the difficulty of proving rationally the superiority of one taste over another one but, at the same time, paradoxically and dialectically, both share a belief in the existence of a 'standard of taste.' For them, as we have seen, good taste is the preserve and privilege of the educated, refined few, and it is a goal to attain as well as a cause of admiration and envy from other people. Both Hume and Smollett therefore use the question of taste at the same time as an indication of the difficulty of asserting absolute criteria of judgment in a chaotic world, and conversely as an element of social and ethical marking. The main difference between the philosopher and the 'novelist' is however in the use that the latter makes of bad taste as a dramatic and rhetorical device to make the reader react and eventually understand what the author's ethical conception of taste is. Whereas Hume's argument opens out on the necessity of reading the best authors and cultivating the fine arts, Smollett is as it were forced to

illustrate the negative side of things – to represent a world in which bad taste prevails, in order to warn us against its dangerous influence. Finally and more generally, it may then be argued that the eighteenth century was the century in which first began the radical shift towards the dominance of popular culture that has become the critical characteristic of our own age. By rejecting the absolute authority of great classical models in order better to express the reality of the world they lived in, authors such as Henry Fielding or Tobias Smollett allowed their own narratives to let themselves be as it were polluted by circumstantial instances of bad taste, thus enabling the 'novel', as a genre, partly to become a vehicle for elements borrowed from popular culture.

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