Defects and Difficulties in Smollett's Peregrine Pickle

JOEL WEINSHEIMER

AT first greeted with all the curiosity due a scandal sheet, *Peregrine Pickle* has since met with little attention and less praise. The prurient excitement over the inclusion of Lady Vane's memoirs in the novel quickly palled, and thereafter *Peregrine Pickle* underwent an almost continuous stream of depreciation. Although Dickens rated Smollett above Fielding and *Peregrine Pickle* above *Tom Jones*, more usually the uneasy bewilderment experienced by those who enter the world of *Peregrine Pickle* emerges in their public comment as indignation or forthright disgust. Hippolyte Taine's denigration of the hero is typical of the novel's nineteenth-century reception: "We get to hate [Peregrine's] rancorous, concentrated, obstinate character, which is at once that of an absolute king, accustomed to please himself at the expense of others' happiness, and that of a boor with only a varnish of education." In our century E. A. Baker unhesitatingly concludes that Smollett is "celebrating the deeds and misdeeds of an arrant young blackguard," and Walter Allen depreciates the function of Peregrine as that of a "joke machine, a mechanism by which a series of practical jokes are projected one after another."[1] The collective charges leveled against *Peregrine Pickle* may be summed up by saying not that the novel lacks realism but that it is too real. Its form echoes experience by inhabiting that limbo between the structured and the amorphous; its morals reflect our own, not by their absence but by their instability.

Recently, however, critical valuation of *Peregrine Pickle* has among some readers undergone an abrupt volteface

toward what seems a spurious eminence. M. A. Goldberg couches his appreciation of the novel in the terms of Scottish "common-sense" ethics and aesthetics, through which glass Smollett appears a subtle theorist seeking in *Peregrine Pickle* to reconcile the creative imagination with moral judgment.[2] Louder applause comes from Robert Giddings, who commends *Peregrine Pickle* as Smollett's "greatest novel," "his most moral novel," and considers it "perverse to prefer *Clinker* to *Pickle*."[3]

Amid such lofty claims, Rufus Putney's more guardedly sympathetic analysis of the novel commands assent. He argues that *Peregrine Pickle* is not formless, that it does demonstrate planning, but at the same time Putney concedes that "Smollett's weakness lay not in the conception but in the execution of the plan."[4] And this admission points us directly to the cause of *Peregrine Pickle's* until now consistently low reputation. The book intends much, it promises much, but what it delivers is often disappointingly vague and confused. The very poignancy of the division between conception and execution accounts for the vituperation with which the novel has been received: *Peregrine Pickle* is offensive because it is a near miss of something precious. By way of redressing the recent inflations of its merit, I will here examine how the novel misses in three inter-connected areas of execution — as a satire, as a comic-picaresque *Bildungsroman*, and as a combination of the two.

It is not surprising that the prime merit of the novel contains the germ of its failure. Few would deny that at least superficially *Peregrine Pickle* answers to the aesthetic ideal of variety. Smollett's fecundity of invention fills with ease a very long novel — if not always with dramatically connected actions, yet with an abundance of static vignettes of varying magnitude.[5] The diversity of *Peregrine Pickle* is evidenced in its wide-ranging physical and mental geography. Though it begins and ends in the English countryside, the novel comprehends all Europe. And in the variety of forms of the human body, its

diversity extends from Emilia's "snowy hemispheres, that rose like a vision of paradise" (p. 774)[6] to the "gummy eyes, lanthorn jaws, and toothless chaps" (p. 380) of Cadwallader Crabtree. The psychological range is equally inclusive. We encounter sadism and love, cruelty and generosity, rancor and friendship. And although the extremes of the moral and emotional scale are forcefully delineated, the author also portrays the gradations between them. Whatever Smollett gleaned from the humors tradition, in *Peregrine Pickle* he was not confined to caricature.

Immersed in this variety, the reader interests himself in the very elementary enjoyment of discovering "what happened next." And indeed Smollett sustains such interest for a surprising number of pages. Soon, however, we tire of the enumeration of quickly-introduced, quickly-forgotten characters and redundant incidents exemplifying the obvious. Paradoxically, Smollett's exuberant variety results in the lack of differentiation between characters and between incidents, and thus leads to the tedium of repetition.

In *Peregrine Pickle*, as in *Count Fathom*, Smollett attempts to forestall such redundancy by incorporating, first, "a uniform plan . . . to which every figure is subservient" and, second, "a principal personage to attract the attention, unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene by virtue of his own importance."[7] Readers have long recognized that the "uniform plan" of *Peregrine Pickle* is manifest at least partly in its multifaceted satire. Throughout the novel Peregrine engages in what Smollett calls "practical satire" (p. 540) by which the hero involves the objects of his ire in physical grotesqueries — such as Pallet's inability to relieve himself while in a woman's dress. Less important perhaps is Peregrine's verbal satire, which begins with his lampoon of Jolter and concludes in precipitating his downfall by way of the pamphlet against the prime minister. Further, we see that the narrator's satire occasion-

ally usurps that of Peregrine, as in the dinner in the manner of the ancients with which Perry has relatively little to do. Finally, there is Smollett's satire. Beyond the fact that he is responsible for the entire novel, such episodes as the bard's recital of the monody on his grandmother's death illustrate that private satire in which only the reader and author are concerned, for none of the characters recognize the parody of Lyttelton. In this category we may also include the several other jibes at Fielding, Garrick, Quin, Chesterfield, Akenside, Rich, Fleetwood, Lacy, and perhaps Hogarth.[8] Of course, Peregrine's practical satire occupies the bulk of the novel. But the author's and narrator's satire combine with that of the hero to remind us, if the constant repetition of the word "satire" does not, that Peregrine is more than a prankster. He is recommended for our approval as a practicing moralist driving the money-lenders from the temple.

"Conscious of the little regard which is, in this age, paid to every species of . . . composition in which neither satire nor obscenity occurs," Smollett, like Peregrine, has "produced an imitation of Juvenal, and lashed some conspicuous characters, with equal truth, spirit, and severity" (p. 637). Considered abstractly as satire, *Peregrine Pickle* focusses our attention on that motley assortment of vice and folly Smollett terms "the world" (p. 766), a world inhabited by

> sharpers who desired to possess an infallible method of cheating, unperceived; by fortune-hunters who wanted to make prize of widows and heiresses; by debauchees who were disposed to lye with other men's wives; by coxcombs who longed for the death of their fathers; by wenches with child, who wished themselves rid of their burthens; by merchants who had insured above value, and thirsted after the news of a wreck; by under-writers who prayed for the gift of prescience, that they might venture money upon such ships only, as would perform the voyage in safety; by Jews who wanted to foresee the fluctuations of stock . . . (p. 568)

Fools, hypocrites, the cunning, the affected, knaves and fops of infinite variety — the list is inexhaustible. In

Peregrine Pickle an entire society divested of its fig leaves parades in review. Thus, the satirical tone unifies and organizes the multitudinous characters and incidents of the novel for the "purpose of a uniform plan," which is to expose and punish a world of vice and folly.

Unfortunately, the novel's satire often goes sour. It does so not because such widespread condemnation tends toward misanthropy (in fact, we are able to enjoy such cynicism quite readily). Rather, too often the hero's practical satire, unlike the verbal kind, seems to verge on sadism. Smollett's narrative detachment and humor cannot disguise that the punishment sometimes exceeds the deserts of the crime. Further, the justification for the chastisement of offenders occasionally appears only after the punishment is effected. In such cases, as David Evans points out, the sentence precedes the trial.[9]

More important among the causes of satiric failure is the discrepancy between Peregrine perceived as a satirist and as a hero. It is by now a familiar critical tenet that the satirist, *per se*, is not a man but a persona. The primary function of this mask, whether that of the *vir bonum* or the ingénue, is to direct attention away from the satirist and toward the victim. Because we are aware that moral judgment implies as much about the judge as about the offender, the satirist must objectify and depersonalize his ridicule by wearing the gown of office. But since Peregrine is the hero of the novel, the reader cannot be distracted from close scrutiny of his personality. He is, to repeat Smollett's definition, the "principal personage to attract attention, unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene by virtue of his own importance." Because we are forced to concentrate so steadily on Peregrine, he appears to be an individual fallible like ourselves. Consequently, he loses his absolute righteousness and authority, and our attention is diverted from the satiric victims toward their victimizer.

The problem of objectifying Peregrine's ridicule is precisely described by Ronald Paulson: *Peregrine Pickle* "is a satire which at the same time examines the nature of satire; one in which the reader can never be sure whether a particular episode is to be accepted as true or as a reflection of the satirist himself."[10] When the reader begins reflecting on the satirist, the result is often not an especially ingratiating view of Smollett, of Peregrine, or of satire itself. Particularly telling is that the satiric dispositions of several characters find their natural analogue in food imagery; they, like Samuel Johnson's Democritus, must "feed with varied fools the eternal jest." Hatchway anticipates a "delicious meal" (p. 33) in frightening the credulous Trunnion into marriage; Crabtree "banquets his spleen in beholding his enemies at loggerheads" (p. 387); and Jolter "afforded continual food for the raillery, petulance, and satire of his pupil" (p. 81). This food imagery, particularly as applied to the hero, indicates more than amusement or enjoyment. We come to see Peregrine as a satiric gourmand, whose insatiable appetite requires an infinite fund of fools and knaves. Gradually his addiction to them develops into a symbiotic deadlock. The obnoxious and ridiculous form the springboard of Peregrine's manhood, his pride and independence, at least until he marries Emilia and perhaps after. When the motives of the hero's satirical exploits become suspicious, the objective moral value of the satire is seriously impaired. The butts of ridicule then dissolve into objects of pity, more sinned against than sinning, and the result is confusion. Peregrine is finally both a fully developed hero and a satiric persona — both man and mask — and the two clash.

I have argued that the "uniform plan" of *Peregrine Pickle* is manifest in its satire and that the satire directs us toward the "world". But, as we have seen, the very centrality of this lonely, proud, indignant hero directs our attention away from the world and toward his personality and development. The problems we encounter in delin-

eating Peregrine's education, however, are equal in seriousness to those involved in describing the novel as satire.

In the attempt to convince us that *Peregrine Pickle* can be best understood as a kind of *Bildungrroman*, Robert Giddings traces the development of Peregrine from his initial faults of pride and cupidity through the purgation of imprisonment to the final reward of his union with Emilia. In the Fleet prison, Giddings contends, the hero learns, first, humility: "The Peregrine who before would not have hesitated to take anything he wanted has now become so humbled that he pledged his wearing apparel to an Irish pawnbroker in the Fleet, rather than be beholden to anyone. At this point he could have no pride left."[11] But, on the contrary, it is precisely in the refusal of all help that Peregrine's pride consists. Were it not for the intervention of providence, this self-made man would have obstinately unmade himself and died in the Fleet. Second, according to Giddings, Peregrine learns that "the human bond is more valuable than money."[12] But, again, such an interpretation becomes incredible when we recall that Peregrine declines marriage until the inheritance regenerates his pride by fattening his wallet.

The language describing Peregrine's enlargement from prison encourages us to see him not as rehabilitated but rather emphatically confirmed in his anti-sociality: "His breast was absolutely a stranger to that boasted . . . instinct of affection, by which the charities are supposed to subsist. . . . He found himself delivered from confinement and disgrace, without being obliged to any person upon earth for his deliverance; he had it now in his power to retort the contempt of the world, in a manner suited to his most sanguine wish . . . " (pp. 765-66). In prison Peregrine is charitable even to impoverishment but refuses all charity himself: "he was even more cautious than ever of incurring obligations . . . and at length secluded himself from all society" (p. 748).[13] This is not moral reformation but a desperate vanity. Since mutual

obligation is the basis not only of a solid marriage, but of all types of social cohesion whatever, the reader is unprepared for Peregrine's marriage to Emilia and reinstatement in society.

Although the description of his release from the Fleet purports to show him cleansed and wise, yet the diction of this passage echoes that which was appropriate to Peregrine in his most obnoxious state. At the moral nadir to which he descended upon returning from the Grand Tour, Peregrine determines on seducing Emilia, "whose heart, he by this time, thought he was able to reduce on his own terms" (p. 223); arriving at her door, "he suffered no emotion but that of vanity and pride, favored with an opportunity of self-gratification" (p. 360). With only minimal change after his release from prison, he is, according to the narrator, "enabled to gratify his love, even upon his own terms" (p. 766). The obvious similarity of the diction in the two ostensibly antithetical moral situations cannot but puzzle the reader. Ultimately, we remain unconvinced that Peregrine manifests significant moral development, that he merits the reward symbolized by Emilia, or that he is fit for reintegration into society.[14]

At this point we can see how far *Peregrine Pickle* deviates from the comic norm which, as described by Northrop Frye, includes "as many people as possible in its final society; the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated."[15] Fortified against the incursions of the vicious and foolish, the final society of *Peregrine Pickle* excludes far more characters than it comprehends: only Peregrine, Hatchway, Pipes, Gauntlet, and Emilia are admitted to its idyllic community. But if this consideration points toward a conception of the novel as satire, we are immediately confronted with Peregrine's climactic marriage, the most conventional finale of comedy. Typically, the marriage in comedy effects and symbolizes the crystalization of a reunified society embracing both audience and characters. Yet in *Peregrine Pickle* an anti-society is formed.

The problem involved here is both complex and important. Smollett endeavors to combine the austere integrity of a Swift with the benevolent sociality of a Fielding. The unfortunate consequence is that the novel promotes an ultimately equivocating morality much like that of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach": "Ah, love let us be true / To one another! for the world . . . / Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." Secluded spiritually as well as physically from all others, the lovers see themselves as a moral elite. But this dream of an absolutely exclusive enclave of sense amidst a completely senseless world must always be situated on the cliffs, for it is a highly precarious delusion. We eagerly await Peregrine's admission that he, too, is a Yahoo, but such a bridge between the world and the individual is not forthcoming. In short, the "world" Peregrine despises is far too externalized.

In this uneasy combination of the Swiftian and the Fieldingesque, the satiric and the comic, the reader discerns two distinct sets of mores — the personal and the social — which are never completely integrated.[16] Smollett establishes the personal ethic in individual integrity with its concomitant penetration and unflinching justice. Peregrine dissects his fellow men and metes out appropriate chastisement. If his vigor is sometimes misplaced or overly severe, we may forgive it as the overflow of a fundamentally just cause. This personal integrity finds expression primarily in the satiric episodes and is the norm on which the satire is founded, but it is also fully developed by the plot. Peregrine's autonomy originates in the breakdown of his family connections, which are never replaced even when he is adopted by the Trunnions. During the Grand Tour Peregrine's independence is reflected by his essential loneliness, his separation not only from Gauntlet and Emilia in England, but also from the retinue on the tour. Upon return, his isolation is paralleled and reinforced by his association with Crabtree, whose feigned deafness permits independence and opportunity

for detached observation. Finally, Peregrine's incarceration, wherein he voluntarily and involuntarily severs all social ties, dramatizes the terminus toward which his reliance on unequivocal integrity and detached justice carries him. "After all," as Peregrine rationalizes, "a jail is the best tub to which a cynic philosopher can retire" (p. 678).[17]

Against independence and integrity, Smollett balances what may be termed the social code based on mercy. Social benevolence must overlook and even condone a certain amount of hypocrisy so that each person can retain a modicum of self-importance and yet remain within the community. One manifestation of this principle is simple good manners — a quality not eminently present in Peregrine or his comrades. Early in the novel Hatchway trespasses against manners by "giving loose to his satirical talent" and insists on revealing the undignified cause of Trunnion's lame foot and blind eye, though Trunnion would prefer to boast of them. "As the commodore could not deny the truth of these anecdotes, however unseasonably introduced . . . , [he] reply'd, 'Ay, ay, Jack, every body knows your tongue is no slander, but, howsomever, I'll work you to an oil for this, you dog' " (p. 11). The tone of this section and the entire treatment of Trunnion disposes the reader to excuse the commodore's innocent boasting more readily than the true but "unseasonable" exposure by Hatchway. A society which is to be a society rather than merely an aggregate of unrelated individuals must prevent disintegration by at least minimal toleration of foibles. Peregrine himself exhibits this social sense. Rather than ridicule Gauntlet's self-sufficiency and pride, Peregrine buys him a commission. He is similarly charitable to a host of school-mates and prison-mates. And at one point, "although he was tempted to punish the officiousness of Jolter, by recrimination upon his life and conversation, he generously withstood the impulse of his passion, because he knew that his

governor had no other dependence than the good opinion of the commodore" (p. 135).

More often, though, Peregrine indulges his satirical disposition and thereby breaks down social ties. Such is evident when he absconds with Mrs. Hornbeck ostensibly to chastise her jealously possessive husband. Similarly, our hero dissolves the friendship of Pallet and the physician. When Peregrine first meets them in the gallery, the two are united by mutual esteem — however ill-founded. The physician, for example, covers for Pallet's ignorance of Latin and Greek; but through Peregrine's satirical expertise the friends cultivate a mutual contempt. Whatever distaste for Peregrine's role in this social disintegration Smollett instills in the reader will simultaneously reinforce the sociality inherent in the novel.

As justice constitutes the moral norm of its satire, so also is social mercy a product of those qualities of *Peregrine Pickle* which make it a comic novel. Not only is it about society, it promotes society. Insofar as Smollett enables the reader to penetrate the surface of his characters, insofar as he delineates the intricacies of motivation and personality and in general creates characters who are credible because intelligible, to that extent he involves the reader in a social situation. If not always sympathy, we acknowledge an empathy with certain characters which prevents farce and mitigates satire. As Basil Willey rightly contends, the pure satirist "must, whether deliberately or not, miss precisely those things which make [the butt] endurable to the non-satiric eye. . . . It is a fact of experience that *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*, and the satirist *ex officio* cannot pardon, so he must decline to understand all and explain all."[18]

But most conspicuously in his portrayal of Commodore Trunnion, Smollett does succeed in explaining completely and judging severely. For we see that amiable humorist with relentless ridicule and also with that understanding forgiveness described by Willey. Unfortunately, the precisely balanced responses evoked in particular by Trun-

nion's deathbed scene do not form the stylistic or moral norm of the novel as a whole. Peregrine never achieves Smollett's complex wisdom, which at its best reconciles personal integrity with social benevolence. Most often the characterization of Peregrine sways uneasily between these two poles, as between the horns of an ultimately false dilemma. Smollett announces the paradox in his hero's character very early in the novel and perpetuates it for hundreds of pages. When Peregrine requests in his spunky letter to be released from the tutelage of Keypstick, Mrs. Trunnion "observed that the boy was a pert jackanapes, and deserved to be severely chastised for treating his betters with such disrespect." But her husband counters "that Perry shewed a great deal of spirit and good sense in desiring to be taken from his command . . . " (p. 61). The first judgment is delivered by an alcoholic, the second by an eccentric. Both are equally true and equally partial, and each implies an entire moral framework which seems to contradict the other. Because Smollett consistently reinforces the paradoxical nature of Peregrine, the hero's personality requires not a supplement but an upheaval.

The sources of dissatisfaction with Smollett's conclusion and with the novel as a whole are now clearer. First, Peregrine's cruelty, vanity, and boorishness so outweigh his amiable characteristics that his reformation must effect too great a change to be credible. At times he is simply unworthy of being reclaimed. And so, regardless of the extent of purgation, when one finds Peregrine rewarded, it may seem that Smollett is "celebrating the deeds and misdeeds of an arrant young blackguard." Second, it is not only questionable whether Peregrine has been sufficiently humbled but whether he should be. As we have seen, his vanity is not lessened but rather confirmed in prison. Thus the novel never comes to the admission that the pride of the affected who feel the lash of ridicule and the pride of superiority which bars Peregrine from Emilia are one with the pride of detachment that makes satire possible.

Finally, and most important, the two literary types coexistent in *Peregrine Pickle* are incompletely blended. Viewed as satire, the novel fosters a conception of Peregrine as a spectator of the world, a judge who sees clearly and therefore punishes severely. However, perceived as the hero of a comic *Bildungsroman*, Peregrine is not merely an observer but a participant in the folly and viciousness of the world. Alone, neither perspective fully informs the novel; yet Smollett fails to unify them. Likewise, the two moral stances implied by the novel's tendencies toward the satiric and the comic do not mesh. Smollett seems to recognize that the extreme of personal justice views mercy as ignorance and that the extreme of social charity views justice as cruelty. But the method by which the individual and his society can interact amicably remains unrealized. The comic finesse of Smollett operating on the perennially significant opposition of personal and social good ensures that *Peregrine Pickle* will maintain its position in English letters. Yet to underrate its defects is to undermine that aesthetic ideal in which the novel participates and by which we gauge its potential for excellence.

NOTES

[1]For Dickens' rating see James T. Fields, *Yesterdays with Authors* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1879), p. 239; Taine's opinion is in his *History of English Literature*, trans. H. Van Laun (New York: Worthington, 1889), III, 304; Baker's in *History of the English Novel* (London: Witherby, 1930), IV, 209; and Allen's in "Introduction" to *Peregrine Pickle* (London: Everyman's Library, 1956), p. viii.

[2]*Smollett and the Scottish School: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1959), pp. 50-81.

[3]*The Tradition of Smollett* (London: Methuen, 1967), pp. 18, 97 and 19.

[4]"The Plan of *Peregrine Pickle*," *PMLA*, 60 (1945), 1063.

[5]See William B. Piper, "The Large Diffused Picture of Life in Smollett's Early Novels," *Studies in Philology*, 60 (1963), 45-56.

[6]Page numbers in parenthesis refer to *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*, ed. James L. Clifford (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[7]"Preface" to *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, I (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1925), p. 3.

[8]See Howard S. Buck, *A Study in Smollett, Chiefly "Peregrine Pickle"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), pp. 53-121.

[9]"Peregrine Pickle: The Complete Satirist," *Studies in the Novel*, 3 (1971), 264.

[10]*Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 185.

[11]Giddings, p. 110.

[12]Giddings, p. 111.

[13]If such attitudes are those which make *Peregrine Pickle*, in Gidding's words, "Smollett's most moral novel" (p. 97), we may justly be excused from admiring it.

[14]My view of Peregrine coincides in part with that of Robert Donald Spector, in his *Tobias George Smollett* (New York: Twayne, 1968). Spector rightly argues that, "like a genuine picaro, Perry does not change fundamentally in his character" (pp. 68-69); but I cannot agree that the hero's pride is justified or validated "through the effect of the accrued experiences on the reader" (p. 68).

[15]*Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), p. 165.

[16]I agree with M. A. Goldberg's contention that Peregrine "gravitates between the social and unsocial" (p. 59). Less convincing, as I hope to show, is his conclusion that Smollett finally reconciles reason and fancy, judgment and imagination, in an "aesthetic which is neither self- nor socially-destructive" (p. 78).

[17]That Smollett viewed prison as the terminus of satirical integrity is demonstrated by the parallel fates of Peregrine and Crabtree. For a most suggestive analysis of Crabtree in prison as the ideal satirist, see Paulson, pp. 183-84.

[18]*Eighteenth-Century Background* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), p. 107.