

## A Study of the Language of *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker*

— With Special Reference to  
Lydia Melford's and Jery Melford's Styles —

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### I

Tobias George Smollett's last and most famous novel *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771) is in the epistolary mode and recounts a journey taken by a gouty Welsh gentleman, Matthew Bramble, through England and Scotland.<sup>1</sup> Matthew writes letters to his physician, Lydia Melford writes to a confidential girl friend, her brother Jery Melford to a college acquaintance, Matthew's sister Tabitha Bramble to the housekeeper, and her maid Winifred Jenkins to a fellow servant.<sup>2</sup> The letters are addressed to those people above, but the replies are not included in the novel. Two thirds of the letters are written by Matthew and Jery. Twenty-seven letters are from Matthew, twenty-eight from Jery, eleven letters from Lydia, six from Tabitha, and ten from Winifred. Those letter-writers tell the readers of the exciting expedition through their points of view respectively. Smollett effectively employed multiple points of view to make the fiction entertaining and amusing.

The most obvious feature of the author's multiple point of view is the manner in which each letter-writer characterizes himself or herself through his or her reaction to the sights and scenes encountered on the expedition. At the same time that the reader is being given common knowledge about the social customs of Bath or the mushrooming growth of London, he or she is being intimately introduced to the personality of the observer.<sup>3</sup>

For example, Bramble regards the Circus as "pretty bauble" (34)<sup>4</sup> at Bath, and the corresponding building looks like one of "sumptuous palaces" (39) in Lydia's eyes. Bramble characteristically complains of "the dirt, the stench, the chilling blasts, and perpetual rains" (25) at the Hot Well. The next day Lydia positively writes, "The air is so pure; the Downs are so agreeable... the weather so soft...the prospect so amusing" (27-28).<sup>5</sup> "Lydia's viewpoint softens Bramble's harsh pronouncements and leaves a more neutral impression of sights and events viewed by travelers."<sup>6</sup> Those various

viewpoints of the characters' are also reflected by the linguistic and stylistic difference of their letter-writings. The difference is fundamentally made into characterization in fiction.

In this thesis, we will discuss the linguistic and stylistic difference between Jerry Melford's and Lydia Melford's letter-writings in order to explore the brilliance and trial of the author's characterization in *Humphrey Clinker*.

## II

Jerry and Lydia are brother and sister. The young man is an Oxford spark and his sister is a young romantic young noodle under their uncle's guard. He writes to his friend at a college in Oxford and she writes to her governess and her boarding school friend at Gloucester. The letters of Bramble, Lydia, Tabitha, and Win are letters of reflection, while Jerry's letters are simply documentation of action. Jerry is a good reporter, narrating events without the embroidery of personal animus or affectation, describing scenes with affable objectivity, and, in direct contrast with the others, keeping personality and opinions fairly well in the background.<sup>7</sup>

The young man's letters let the reader see his traveling companions in action. He is also an objective second story-teller of the novel after his uncle, who subjectively writes a numerous longer and more expressive letters. Jerry informs the reader of sights and events that happen during the travel differently from the others.

We are given information about the brother and sister's personality through their uncle's second letter:

My niece---she is a poor good-natured simpleton, as soft as butter, and as easily melted—not that she's a fool—the girl's parts are despicable, and her education has not been neglected; that is to say, she can write and spell, and speak French, and play upon the harpsichord; then she dances finely, has a good figure, and is very well inclined; but, she's deficient in spirit, and so susceptible—and so tender forsooth!—truly, she has got a languishing eye, and reads romances—Then there's her brother, 'squire Jerry, a pert jackanapes, full of college-petulance and self-conceit; proud as a German count, and as hot and hasty as a Welch mountaineer. (13)

Jerry also describes his sister: "I found her a fine, tall girl, of seventeen, with an agreeable person; but remarkably simple, and quite ignorant of the world. This disposition, and want of experience, had exposed her to the addresses of a person" (10). Lydia describes herself as "a young inexperienced creature like me, or weak nerves and strong apprehensions" (322). In comparison with Lydia's personality, Jerry's is concealed.

As soon as the Brambles start from Brambleton Hall, Lydia breaks out in an uproar

by being caught in a romance with an actor. Both Jery's and Lydia's first letters begin with her love affair, which predicts the expenditure with many vicissitudes and makes the readers excited.

### III

In this part, we will roughly discuss Lydia's and Jery's languages and styles in their letters. Jery writes only to his friend (Sir Watkin Phillips) at Oxford. The beginning of his first letter is as follows:

DEAR PHILLIPS,/ As I have nothing more at heart than to convince you and I am incapable of forgetting, or neglecting the friendship I made at college, I now begin that correspondence by letters, which you and I agreed, at parting, to cultivate. I begin it sooner than I intended, that you may have it in your power to refute any idle reports which may be circulated to my prejudice at Oxford... (9)

Jery's lines show that he pleads with his trustful friend to rebut his dispute with Lydia's boyfriend at the college as soon as possible. At a glance, we find that Jery's lines have a lot of polysyllabic words like "incapable" and "correspondence" and consist of several complex sentences with the relative pronoun clause and the conjunction "that" clause.

Lydia's first letter is sent to her governess (Mrs Jermyn). The opening passage of her letter is as follows:

DEAR MADAM, / Having no mother of my own, I hope you will give me leave to disburthen my poor heart to you, who have always acted the part of a kind parent to me, ever since I was put under your care, --Indeed, and indeed, my worthy governess may believe me, when I assure her, that I never harboured a thought that was otherwise than virtuous; and, if God will give me grace, I shall never behave so as to cast a reflection on the care you have taken in my education. (11)

Lydia's lines show that she is very dependent on her governess by calling her "a kind parent" and "my worthy governess". "Lydia appears as a contrite little ninny who has nearly fallen head over heels in love and humbly begs her revered governess's pardon."<sup>8</sup> She writes to Mrs. Jermyn again in the novel. This letter appears on the day of departure for the travel and the other near the end of the travel. She writes the other letters to her old school chum in Gloucester.<sup>9</sup> We easily notice that Lydia's use of adjectives such as "poor" and "kind" is conspicuous and that she writes in more colloquial style with exaggerating repetition like "Indeed, and indeed".

To compare the two letters, Jery does not repeat any special adjectives and colloquial phrases like his sister, and his vocabulary tends to consist of literary words. The linguistic feature of his letter writing helps to make him different from his sister. The only peculiarity common to their letter-writings is that they are able to write in proper

or standard English. The use of proper English reflects their educated background: Jery is an Oxford University student and Lydia is educated at a proper boarding school at Gloucester.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to associate the language with the language user's social background. His or her linguistic situation reflected his or her social situation in the eighteenth century. People spoke and wrote in English differently according to their social status at that time. They noticed that the gap between standard language and vulgar language led to class distinction.

There is another interesting linguistic example to illustrate the relation between the character's language and his or her social situation in the novel. Among the Brambles, Tabitha Bramble and her maid Winifred Jenkins often use non-standard English in words and usage, such as "don't forget to have the gate shit (= shut) every evening before dark" (8), "she has gi'en me her yallow trollopea" (41) and "You knows as how" (42). The two women use *heterography* and *malapropism* in words, and vulgar contraction<sup>11</sup> and syntactic error in usage, in their writing.<sup>12</sup> We can imagine their writing sounds uneducated or provincial to the readers. Their language reflects their own social background.

#### IV

In this section, we will explore several remarkable linguistic differences between Jery's and Lydia's letters according to some categories.

##### 1. Vocabulary

Jery's words tend to be full of polysyllabic abstract and literary words though the number of the words depends on the content of his letters. He is a university student who is exposed to academic and learned surroundings. He naturally absorbs literary or learned words from the environment. Historically speaking, those words were derived from Latin, Greek, and French, and pertained to science, religion, medicine, and philosophy.

Jery meets two parsons and comments on their personal histories at Bath:

Now we are upon the subject of parsons, I must tell you a ludicrous adventure, which was atchieved the other day by Tom Eastgate, whom you may remember on the foundation of Queen's. He had been very assiduous to pin himself upon George Prankley, who was a gentleman-commoner of Christ-church, knowing the said Prankley was heir to a considerable estate, and would have the advowson of a good living, the incumbent of which was very old and infirm. (70)

The word "foundation" in "on the foundation" means *scholarship*, and the *OED* defines

the word “gentleman-commoner” as meaning “One of a privileged class of undergraduates formerly recognized in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge” (s.v. *gentleman-commoner* 1). Those words are technical registers of an English university. The words “advowson” and “incumbent” are related to the ecclesiastical benefice from the Anglican Church.

We have other examples of polysyllabic words.

appendage, buffoonery (17); accommodate, rustication, singularities, peevishness, exhalations, nuisance, prejudicial, solemnity, investigation, olfactory nerves (18); inflammation (21); intercourse (28); hypochondriac, misanthrope (48)

The rate of polysyllabic words used in each letter of his depends on its content, and his use of them is conspicuous in comparison with the other characters’.

Compared with Jery’s vocabulary, Lydia’s is simple and does not consist of polysyllabic words. She has certain favorite adjectives and adverbs, such as “charming”, “charmingly”, “poor”, and so on. Those words frequently appear on her letters and suit young girls. It is presumed that Smollett makes Lydia use the special words found in popular sentimental literature because women and girls were fond of literature of the kind in the eighteenth century. The literature emphasizes the importance of the individual’s emotional state and benevolence to the weak. At Bath, Lydia comments on the important presence of “the booksellers shops”:

Hard by the Pump-room, is a coffee-house for the ladies; but my aunt says, young girls are not admitted, inasmuch as the conversation turns upon politics, scandal, philosophy, and other subjects above our capacity; but we are allowed to accompany them to the booksellers shops, which are charming places of resort; where we read novels, plays, pamphlets, and newspapers, for so small a subscription as a crown a quarter; and in these offices of intelligence, (as my brother calls them) all the reports of the day, and all the private transactions of the Bath, are first entered and discussed. (40)

Here is the traditional idea that women discuss topics which are essentially trivial, and this stereotypical thought defines what men do as important, and conversely what women do as less important throughout history. The “booksellers shops” were “charming places of resort” where young girls assembled to read many pieces of sentimental literature in the eighteenth century. The “charming” and “charmingly” are very positive words for Lydia. We have other examples of those words:

this is a charming romantic place (27)

Love and friendship are, without doubt, charming passions (38)

in a charming moon-light evening (91)

he talks so charmingly, both in verse and prose (38)

She calls herself “her poor Liddy” when she writes to her governess for advice. “I rejoice to hear that my governess is in good health, and, still more, that she no longer

retains any displeasure towards her poor Liddy" (90). She seems to exaggerate her situation so pessimistically as to make herself humble. She "is an example of pure sensibility"<sup>13</sup> and is associated with a weak and dependent heroine in a sentimental fiction in the eighteenth century. She likes to use the adjective "poor" as follows:

the poor girl has weak nerves, and was afraid of his beard (27)

The poor youth declared (27)

We have other examples:

to have some melancholy doubts (57)

the friendship which we contracted in our tender years (90)

## 2. Figures of speech: simile and hyperbole

Jery often use similes effectively and his similes sometimes sounds funny. Simile is a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that often includes *like* or *as*. Jery does not get along with his uncle on the first stage of the expenditure. He regards his relation to Matthew as "his disposition and mine, which, like oil and vinegar" (18). Jery's similes show his use of wit and irony to conceal his feelings. Lydia uses a few similes: "she (= Win) looked like the ghost of some pale maiden" (39) and "the Pump-room; which is crowded like a Welsh fair" (39). We have other examples of Jery's simile

Our aunt, Tabitha, acts upon him as a perpetual grind-stone (29)

He is as tender as a man without a skin (48)

he had a skin as fair as alabaster (78)

Mr. Micklewhimmen ... came running as nimble as a buck along the passage (170)

the sand soft as velvet (173)

Mrs. Bramble ... and screamed as if she had seen a ghost. (257)

Mrs. Jenkins, who looked like a mermaid (301)

Lydia describes her situation in hyperbole with "my tears fall so fast that I cannot keep the paper dry". Hyperbole is an exaggerated or extravagant statement used to make a strong impression, but not intended to be taken literally. Smollett makes her use the figure of speech because it was one of well-worn devices used in sentimental novels. He makes her a weeping or sobbing character in fictions of the kind.<sup>14</sup> He was aware of the influence of sentimental literature, and made ironical remarks about its popularity and fashion by employing Lydia. We have other examples:

nor did I once close my eyes for three nights running (11)

you would think all the ships in the universe were here assembled (91)

I really thought myself in paradise (91)

## 3. Interjections

Lydia frequently puts interjections and swear words like "O, my dear companion!" and "O heaven!" in her letters. She tends to be emotional and display self hatred .

The exclamations for request help to make her letters sound very feminine because they show Lydia's weakness and dependence. On the other hand, Jery puts neither swear words of his own nor interjections of his own in his letters though he transcribes other characters' interjections and swear words. He remains unperturbed concealing his feeling, as if he were a reporter. The author makes him a consistently objective reporter of the expedition. We have other examples of Lydia's interjection:

But, alas! I begin to perceive that will not be in my power (12)

O, my dear companion! What shall I tell you? (26)

O gracious! What d'ye think he said? —it was Wilson, sure enough! (27)

A person passed a horseback, whom (gracious Heaven!) I instantly discovered to be Wilson! (296)

Good God! did he really appear? (297)

Thank God, my uncle is much better than he was yesterday. (297)

O heaven! is it possible (298)

#### 4. Intensives: *so* and *exceedingly*

Lydia always uses the intensive "so" instead of the intensive "very". The intensive "so" is women's favorite intensive.<sup>15</sup> She enjoys spending time with company and drinks the strange water at Hot Well. She describes them saying:

the company is assembled before dinner; so good-natured, so free, so easy; and there we drink the water so clear, so pure, so mild, so charmingly maukish (28)

Lydia also likes the so-that construction. She uses the contraction more frequently than Jery. We have other examples:

he always eyed me so earnestly, that I began to be very uneasy (26)

I was so surprised, and so frightened, that I fainted away; during which he has not appeared (27)

a pretty little gentleman, so sweet, so fine, so civil and polite, that in our country he might pass for the prince of Wales (38)

Jery does not use the feminine *so* but most frequently uses the intensive "exceedingly".

a maiden of forty-five, exceedingly starched, vain, and ridiculous (10)

he is exceedingly cautious of giving offence (29)

The poor 'squire, exceedingly alarmed at what he had heard and seen (71)

## V

Last we will see the striking stylistic differences between Jery's and Lydia's letter writings in the novel.

Jery Melford is a serious observer of the travel. Through his twenty eight letters, he accurately and objectively describes the various incidents and a great variety of characters he meets on the expedition, which also almost narrates the novel. The

young reporter describes funny scenes like a piece of farce. This is a good example of how he describes the funny scene of Matthew Bramble and his man Humphrey Clinker on the beach in Scarborough:

One morning, while he was bathing in the sea, his man Clinker took it in his head that his master was in danger of drowning; and, in this conceit, plunging into the water, he lugged him out naked on the beach, and almost pulled off his ear in the operation. You may guess how this achievement was relished by Mr. Bramble, who is impatient, irascible, and has the most extravagant ideas of decency and decorum in the oeconomy of his own person—In the first ebullition of his choler, he knocked Clinker down with his fist; but he afterwards made him amends for this outrage, and, in order to avoid the further notice of the people, among whom this incident had made him remarkable, he resolved to leave Scarborough next day. (179-80)

Jery reports the comical event on the beach without his thoughts and feelings. The readers will laugh at the scene as well as Jery's friend, Watkin Phillips.

This is another example expressing of how his writing style is expressed through his letters. When he meets people from Ireland and Scotland, Jery transcribes their speech with an accent. At Bath, he meets an Irishman whose name is Sir Ulic Mackilligur and transcribes his speech with an Irish accent:

Finding himself intruded upon, by a person he did not know, he forthwith girded himself with a long iron sword, and advancing to me, with a peremptory air, pronounced, in a true Hibernian accent, "Mister What d'ye callum, by my saoul and conscience, I am very glad to sea you, if you are after coming in the way of friendship; and indeed, and indeed now, I believe you are my friend sure enough, gra; though I never had the honour to sea your face before, my dear; for becaase you come like a friend, without any ceremony at all, at all— (30)

The Irishman uses the exclamtion "gra", the Irish equivalent of "my dear", an expression he also uses. He also employs the typical Irish construction "if you are after coming" for "if you come".<sup>16</sup> His dialectal pronunciation is transcribed in "d'ye callum", "saoul" (= soul), "sea" (= see), and "becaase" (=because). He seems to take on the duty of reporting as diligently as possible. There is no transcription as such in Lydia's letters.

Lydia does not take the style of a reporter like her brother. She is free to write her own reaction to unexpected events or her impression of sights on the expedition. The young girl happens to see Wilson again and becomes too agitated to control herself. She writes about her anxiety and her request for her friend's help:

O Letty, what shall I do?—where shall I turn for advice and consolation?—shall I implore the protection of my uncle, who has been always kind and compassionate.—this must be my last resource.—I dread the thoughts of making him uneasy; and would rather suffer a thousand deaths than live the cause of



dissension in the family.—I cannot perceive the meaning of Wilson's coming hither:—perhaps, he was in quest of us, in order to disclose his real name and situation:—but wherefore pass without staying to make the least inquire?—My dear Willis, I am lost in conjecture. (297)

She effectively uses *dash* as a good method to express her uneasiness. Agitated, she asks several questions and appeals to her friend by inserting her friend's names like "My dear Willis". She very frequently makes synonymous word-pairs like "kind and compassionate" for emphasis.

Thus we see the difference between Jery's and Lydia's languages and writing styles in their letters. They are brother and sister who are wellborn and educated at proper schools respectively. The difference between their languages and styles is that Jery observes sights and events more objectively by quoting the other characters' speech and action like a police reporter; Lydia observes the corresponding sights and events more subjectively and affectedly like a heroine in sentimental literature. Smollett researched and examined the young people's language and writing styles according to their sex, age, education, and tastes to make the work authentic. The letters serve to tell the story, to give different versions of the same visit, and to characterize the letter writers.<sup>17</sup> Smollett is certainly a genius of characterization in fiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford R. Johnson, *Plots and Characters in the Fiction of Eighteenth-Century English Authors*, Vol. II (Hamden: Archon Books, 1978) 26.

<sup>2</sup> Roger P. McCutcheon, *Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1950) 62.

<sup>3</sup> Byron Gassman, "the Economy of Humphrey Clinker", *Tobias Smollett Bicentennial Essays Presented to Lewis M. Knapp*, ed. G.S. Rousseau and P.G. Bouce (New York: OUP, 1971) 159.

<sup>4</sup> The edition used throughout is Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker*, ed. Thomas R. Preston (Athens: the University of Georgia Prs., 1990). Hereafter the page number is cited parenthetically.

<sup>5</sup> Gassman 161.

<sup>6</sup> Gassman 164.

<sup>7</sup> Gassman 161.

<sup>8</sup> Paul-Gabriel Bouce, *The Novels of Tobias Smollett*, trans. Antonia White (London: Longman, 1976) 193.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson 27.

<sup>10</sup> *The Cambridge History of English Literature* notes: "The education of girls above the humblest rank was wholly private. Swift, in a fragmentary essay *On the Education of Ladies*, states the practice thus: 'the care of their education is either entirely left to their mothers, or they are sent to boarding schools, or put into the hands of English or French governesses.'" *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. Sir A.W. Ward and A.R. Waller, Vol. IX (Cambridge: the University Press, 1952) 401-02.

<sup>11</sup> In *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700-1800* (New York: Russell & Russell Inc, 1962) 172, Sterling Andrus Leonard cites John Hornsey's prescription about the verb contraction: "But this and all such like contractions ought to be avoided

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as much as possible, especially in the writing of prose. In poetry and in familiar conversation contractions are allowable; as, *lov'd, prais'd, for loved, praised, &c.*" (*A Short English Grammar in Two Parts*, 1793) 93.

<sup>12</sup> We sometimes find the unusual form of the verbs in Jery's and Lydia's letters. Jery spells the unusual past tense form "prop'd": prop'd upon crutches (48). The contracted form of verbs was avoided in the eighteenth century prose. Lydia spells the rare past tense form "stopt" (= stopped): my brother; who stopt her on the road (27). The *OED* says that the form "stopt" is obsolete now.

<sup>13</sup> Maximillian E. Novak, *Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (London: Macmillan Prs. Ltd., 1983) 159.

<sup>14</sup> Novak 158: "The aim of novels of this kind was to produce tears in abundance".

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Coates discusses the intensive *so*, in her *Women, Men, and Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Longman, 1993) 20.

<sup>16</sup> N.F.Blake, *Non-Standard Language in English Literature* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd, 1981) 121.

<sup>17</sup> McCutcheon 62.