

Fathoming Intelligence: The “Impartial” Novelist and the Passion for News in Tobias Smollett’s *Ferdinand Count Fathom*

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TOBIAS SMOLLETT’S *Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753) occupies a place in the history of the novel chiefly because of the extended definition of the genre that the author provides in his preface to the work: “A Novel is a large diffused picture, comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups, and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purposes of an uniform plan ... to which every individual figure is subservient. But this plan cannot be executed with propriety, probability or success, without a principle 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.”¹ As John Barrell has astutely demonstrated, this definition is consistent with Smollett’s narrative practice in novels such as *Roderick Random* and *Peregrine Pickle*, where characters’ unrestrained mobility enables them to map the “differentiated, fragmented society” through which they circulate, thereby illustrating how that “society can be grasped in terms of relation, and not simply of difference.”² However, critics have found the definition harder to apply to the novel in which it appears, partly because

¹ Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753), ed. Paul-Gabriel Boucé (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 43. References are to this edition.

² John Barrell, *English Literature in History 1730–80: An Equal, Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), 185, 183.

Ferdinand Count Fathom, despite its title, lacks the sustained single “principle personage” that Smollett identifies as the key to a novel’s unity. While the first two-thirds of the book focus on the villainous Fathom, he virtually disappears in the final third, where the virtuous Renaldo replaces him as the novel’s central character. This is one reason, of the several that I will address in the course of this article, why many Smollett critics find the novel merely diffuse, devoid of any “uniform plan” that could render coherent its variety of incidents. Such is the opinion of Paul-Gabriel Boucé, who describes the work as a disconnected series of events “without any transition brought about by the unfolding of the story.”³ The few critics who have attempted to redeem *Ferdinand Count Fathom* from Boucé’s labelling it as the worst of Smollett’s fictions have often sought the novel’s “principle of order” in the very discontinuity that appears to disrupt it. Jerry Beasley, for example, takes Smollett at his word when the latter defines the novel as a “large diffused picture.” Instead of bemoaning the lack of narrative progression in the novel, which Beasley admits is “superficially linear” at best, he argues that we should examine it as we would a series of “canvasses,” the collective meaning of which lies not in the pictures themselves but in their “juxtaposition.”⁴ Such attempts, however, must confront the fact that Smollett himself associates these canvasses with disorder, unless they ultimately contribute to the portrait of a single character. Alas, we appear to be back where we started.

Perhaps, then, we should start somewhere else. The explicitness of the prefatory definition (“A Novel is ...”) has arguably led critics to ignore how Smollett immediately supplements it with a second, though more oblique, definition of the genre, one that refashions the identity of his “principle personage” and his role in the novel. While the definition in the preface indicates that the main character has the ability to elucidate the meaning of the

³ Paul-Gabriel Boucé, *The Novels of Tobias Smollett*, trans. Antonia White (London and New York: Longman, 1976), 149.

⁴ Jerry Beasley, “Smollett’s Novels: *Ferdinand Count Fathom* for the Defense,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 20 (1984): 169. For a summary of other recent criticism that has attempted to account for the novel’s “difficulties as products of complexity, not incoherence,” see John McAllister, “Conversion, Seduction, and Medicine in Smollett’s *Ferdinand Count Fathom*,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 1, no. 4 (1989): 319–20.

narrative, Smollett begins the *Adventures* proper by questioning that very authority, which he uses as a foil to defend his own authorial position. Playing devil's advocate, Smollett starts by asking a question that might be on the mind of his audience: would not Fathom be able to provide the reader with a more complete and accurate account of his adventures than the novelist, since they are, after all, his adventures? Such would be the conclusion of Cardinal de Retz, whose theory of history writing Smollett summarizes in the novel's opening sentences. De Retz argues that the character's proximity to events and knowledge of his own motives make him a more accurate reporter than historians like Smollett. The latter "must of necessity, be subject to mistakes ... unless they derive their *intelligence* from the candid confession of the person whose character they represent." It is therefore better for "the public" if such historians step aside and allow "every man of importance" to act as his own intelligencer—that is, "provided he has honesty enough to tell the truth, without suppressing any circumstance, that may tend to the *information* of the reader" (45, emphasis added). To Smollett, this caveat is essential, and it forms the basis for his defense of the third-person narrator's mediatory role in the novel. While de Retz's argument may hold true in theory, the kind of intelligencer that he describes is "rarely found" in real life, for his proximity to events necessarily points to a self-interest in the information he provides, which leads him to "represent objects ... through the mists of prejudice and passion" (45). Such passion, Smollett argues, is infectious. The reader, who should be "unconcerned" in the information he consumes, "cannot help *interesting himself* ... with all the zeal of a warm adherent" (45, emphasis added). This manipulation of affect makes the character-intelligencer truly dangerous, for, by "interesting himself" in the "phantasy" of the intelligencer, the reader becomes an "adherent" of his worldview. Smollett suggests that the distance separating his "impartial historian" from the events he describes—a distance that bespeaks a disinterested perspective—is necessary to preserve not only the integrity of information but also to prevent the reader from becoming too involved in the intelligence he consumes.⁵ If

⁵ Here Smollett is arguably participating in the same "politics and poetics of distance" that Mark Salber Phillips attributes to David Hume and other mid-century historians in *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical*

the passionate intelligencer “warms” the reader to his own interests, the disinterested third-person narrator cools him off by reporting intelligence in a manner that encourages, rather than undermines, his “unconcern.”

Implicit in this discussion of reportage is a definition of the novel that differs from the prefatory one in two fundamental ways. First, while Smollett initially labels his genre a species of “invention,” here he attests that it is a vehicle of “information” or “intelligence.” This ambivalence about the fictionality of his work indicates that Smollett is participating in the “news/novels discourse” that Lennard Davis has argued shaped the eighteenth-century novelist’s “reflexive” self-representation as a writer of both fact and fiction.⁶ In this article, I approach the novel from this epistemological perspective, thereby treating it as a medium for intelligence as well as invention, rather than making formalist distinctions that Smollett apparently did not share. Second, the success of the novel, which once rested on the ability of the main character to “unite the incidents,” now depends on the mediation of the author himself, who protects his audience from their own impassioned credulity by purifying the information he provides of self-interest. This role makes the objective novelist the real “principle personage” of the work. Smollett promises the reader that the ensuing adventures will demonstrate the value of his

Writing in Britain, 1740–1820 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). According to Phillips, Hume regarded “impartiality ... as his highest aim and greatest success as a historian” because it was central to reforming the politicization of the past promoted by previous historians. Hume’s *History of England* (1754) was published only one year after *Fathom*, which was followed quickly by Smollett’s *The Complete History of England* (1757)—itself a continuation of Hume’s *History*. In his prefatory “Plan” for this work, Smollett likewise claims to have rejected that “illiberal partiality which has disgraced the works of many an English historian” (n.p.). It is to such disinterestedness that Smollett attributes the superior coherence of his narrative. If the “inflamed” passions of interested historians serve to “disunite the chain of incidents,” Smollett’s objectivity enables him to select his material with “precision” and thereby to produce a “well connected detail of historical events.” This narrative coherence and the disinterest that produces it serve as guarantors for the history’s “certain intelligence.” Such is the case in *Fathom* as well, as I will show below. Given the similarity of the texts’ language, one can speculate that Smollett used *Fathom* to both theorize and defend the narrative principles that he would later draw upon for his *Complete History*.

⁶ Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 51.

mediatory function, as well as the perils to which the reader would be subject should the author abdicate this role to his character: “by that time the reader shall have glanced over the subsequent sheets, I doubt not, but he will bless God, that the adventurer was not his own historian” (46). In this account, it is the author, and not his character, who “closes the scene by virtue of his own importance,” leaving the reader with the lasting impression that the novelist’s disinterested economy of information makes him the true hero of the novel.

In my analysis, I will take Smollett’s proleptic comment seriously by examining how this debate over the proper vehicle for intelligence persists in the “subsequent sheets” of the novel as a means to legitimate the author-function that he defends in its opening pages. His two central characters—Fathom and Renaldo—represent competing economies of information that function respectively according to the principles of diffusion and unity that ground Smollett’s prefatory definition of the novel. These economies are associated with competing genres marked by different investments in the information they provide. The diffuse and dissociated articles of “intelligence” that Fathom retails in England collectively invoke an image not of the novel but of those “modern histories”—newspapers and magazines—that served as eighteenth-century England’s primary vehicles of information.⁷ Recent scholarship on the formal similarities between newspapers and novels tends to emphasize how both genres participate in a “new sense of time” that calls attention to the continuous unfolding of the present.⁸ However, mid-century critics of news discourse seemed less interested in the continuity between issues of newspapers than in each issue’s internal

⁷ Newspapers in the eighteenth century were frequently called “histories.” Johnson, for example, refers to “those minute historians the writers of news” in the *Idler*. See *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 2, ed. Walter J. Bate, John M. Bullitt and L.F. Powell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 22. Yet the status of news as history was a matter of debate in the period. The writer of the *Memoirs of the Society of Grub Street*, 2 vols. (London: Wilfold, 1737), for instance, claims that “all News-papers, as to their historical parts, may be justly looked on as the productions of Grub Street” (1:viii).

⁸ Davis, 71. For similar accounts of the eighteenth-century experience of time, see J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990), chap. 7; and Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries and English Diurnal Form 1660–1785* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

discontinuities. They compared the diffuse and disconnected information that these “modern histories” provided with the equally diverse market for luxury goods and accused the former of replicating and reinforcing the passion for consumption which made that market thrive. Smollett—who likewise regarded newspapers as part of the “general tide of luxury”⁹—personifies the periodical’s heterogeneous content in the villainous Fathom, who uses his fictions of “universal intelligence” to create a market for an equally miscellaneous catalogue of fake commodities.¹⁰ However, the virtuous Renaldo, who dramatizes the author function that Smollett attributes to his “impartial historian,” exposes the interested nature of Fathom’s intelligence by rewriting his adventures as a consistent and objective narrative. Through this dialectic between periodical and novel, Smollett attempts to reconcile diffusion with uniformity by subordinating the pure heterogeneity of intelligence to the control of an author, whose disinterest and discernment, he implies, endows the novel with a superior economy of information and provides the reader with a model for its consumption. The incoherence of *Ferdinand Count Fathom* is actually part of Smollett’s larger argument about narrative coherence, which he associates with the presence of a “principle personage” who turns out to represent none other than the novelist himself. Because this interpretation rests upon a familiarity with the aforementioned anxieties about periodical intelligence, I will first briefly outline those concerns before showing how Smollett deploys them to fashion his own authorial position.

⁹ Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771), ed. Lewis M. Knapp (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 36. Smollett tends to describe the consumption of both goods and news in similar terms: while the commercial market is a “tide,” the “daily papers” are “fountains of impurity” (*Critical Review*, September 1762) and “deluges of filth” (*Briton*, 28 August 1762). For a critical history of Smollett’s “crusade against luxury” and his parallel opinions about newspapers, see John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), chaps. 4 and 5.

¹⁰ The phrase “universal intelligence” was often employed in the titles of newspapers and magazines of the period to emphasize their inclusiveness. While the phrase was first used in 1680 by the *Universal Intelligencer* (a forerunner of Cave’s magazine format) and again by the *Weekly Magazine; or Universal Intelligence* of 1732, it became far more prominent after the publication of the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, as periodicals such as the *Grand Magazine of Universal Intelligence* and the *Edinburgh Chronicle, Or Universal Intelligencer* tried to draw attention to their own exhaustive subject matter.

With the publication of Edward Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine; or Trader's Monthly Intelligencer* in 1731, the concept of what constituted news rapidly transformed. Cave's definition of intelligence was a loose one, as his paper compiled under that heading not only political and economic news—the standard fare of earlier papers—but also everything from travel literature and society gossip to poems, epigrams, and riddles. As Iona Italia has noted, “the strength of the *Gentleman's Magazine* lay precisely in its heterogeneity,” which made it wildly successful among a readership with equally diverse interests.¹¹ In order to compete, newspapers quickly expanded their contents and began to play up the “universal” quality of their “intelligence”—terms that they often conjoined in their titles. The editor of the *Grub Street Journal*, which Alvin Sullivan calls “the most widely read essay journal of the 1730s,” provides a history of this transformation.¹² Cave, he says, is now the “chief engineer of Grub Street,” and his competitors have no choice but to adopt his methods if they want to avoid being “blown up” by the success of his paper. This competition leads to an “epidemic Bibliomany” among news writers, whose avarice makes them stop at nothing to increase their “storehouse” of articles. The result is a jumble of intelligence—much of which is plagiarized from other papers—that resembles the miscellaneous, and often stolen, merchandise of a London pawnshop: newspapers “pack up [their articles] like the goods of a pillaged house, in great quantity and variety,” “leav[ing] their wise customers to separate and sort them for their own proper use.”¹³ Just how readers sorted the variety of “goods” in newspapers and magazines, or whether they did so at all, was a question of much import to mid-century writers, who regarded the economy of reading they promoted as an embodiment of the commercial and literary values of the age.

Recent literary critics have noted the eighteenth-century newspaper's relative lack of structure and have speculated in

¹¹ Iona Italia, *Anxious Employment: Journalism in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2005), 111. Many thanks to Iona for letting me look at her book in manuscript, which has been instrumental to my understanding of mid-century news culture in England.

¹² Alvin Sullivan, ed., *British Literary Magazines: The Augustan Age and the Age of Johnson, 1698–1788* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 144.

¹³ *Memoirs of the Society of Grub Street*, 1:xii, xv. The editor considered his *Journal* as one of the papers “blown up” by the success of Cave's magazine.

interesting ways about how this formlessness inaugurated new methods of reading. In his study of Samuel Johnson, Robert DeMaria Jr, for example, describes the “miscellaneousness of the newspapers” and their largely undifferentiated format, which neither grouped articles according to strict subject categories nor separated them by “slugs and headlines.” Instead, newspapers tended to shift abruptly from one unrelated story to the next with no more than a paragraph break to mark the transition.¹⁴ Kevis Goodman presents a similar picture of the “extraordinary collision of undifferentiated items” in the newspaper, which, as she states, “worked to counter narrative continuity and coherence.”¹⁵ Though DeMaria and Goodman note the confusion that readers must have experienced as a result of this “anti-narrative tendency,” they both stress the creative agency that it allowed newspaper readers. For DeMaria, the “unframed” nature of news stories left readers with “a good deal of room for adaptation and interpretation,” an opinion echoed by Goodman: “the ‘dissociating articles’ of newspaper prose rendered reality as pliant” and therefore “open to a playful negotiation.”¹⁶ While the newspaper no doubt offered its readers such opportunities, its detractors often complained that its miscellaneous content actually discouraged such interpretive work, largely because the hodgepodge of “goods” that the newspaper offered its readers encouraged them to approach reading as a form of consumption.

As the series of commercial metaphors in the *Grub Street Journal* passage above makes clear, the newspaper was regarded not only as a commodity, but also as a reflection of the commercial market at its worst. Oliver Goldsmith’s Asian traveller in *The Citizen of the World* perhaps speaks for his age when he refers to the “joint manufacture” of a “single gazette” as the epitome of Europe’s “commercial spirit” gone awry: “I have often admired the commercial spirit which prevails over Europe; have been surprised to see them carry on a traffic with productions, that an Asiatic stranger would deem entirely useless. It is a proverb in China, that a European suffers not even his spittle to be

¹⁴ Robert DeMaria Jr, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 172, 161.

¹⁵ Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 74.

¹⁶ DeMaria, 162; Goodman, 75.

lost; the maxim, however, is not sufficiently strong, since they sell even their lies to great advantage.”¹⁷ Goldsmith’s economic metaphors echo the language that writers throughout the eighteenth century used to describe the traffic in news: both Daniel Defoe and John Arbuthnot, for example, refer to news writing as a “manufacture,” its practitioners as “corporations,” and news itself as both “commodity” and “coin.”¹⁸ This parallel was, of course, encouraged by the increasing space that newspapers and magazines devoted to commercial advertisements, which “tightened the connection between reading and ingestion” by mimicking the rhetoric of the news stories that surrounded them, thereby blurring the distinction between intelligence and advertising.¹⁹ The increasingly heterogeneous contents of these periodicals likewise contributed to this impression, making them fitting symbols for the equally various and, to some, valueless catalogue of goods that flooded the market during the height of the consumer revolution. Samuel Johnson renders this connection explicit in an issue of the *Idler*, where he attributes the recent increase in “the writers of news” to the “restlessness of mind” that

¹⁷ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*, in *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, vol. 2, ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 31–32.

¹⁸ Daniel Defoe, *Review* (19 July 1712), in *The Best of Defoe’s “Review,”* ed. William L. Payne (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 73–77; John Arbuthnot, *The Art of Political Lying*, in *The Life and Works of John Arbuthnot*, ed. George Aitken (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 294–303. Such economic metaphors appear on virtually every page of Defoe’s essay; for Arbuthnot, see esp. 300–2.

¹⁹ DeMaria, 175. For histories of newspaper advertising and its narrative strategies, see also Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Hutchinson, 1983); Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); F.C. Doherty, *A Study in Eighteenth-Century Advertising Methods: The Anodyne Necklace* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1992); Peter M. Briggs, “‘News from the Little World’: A Critical Glance at Eighteenth-Century Advertising,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 23 (1994): 29–45; and Lisa Foreman Cody, “‘No Cure, No Money’: or, the Invisible Hand of Quakery: The Language of Commerce, Credit and Cash in Eighteenth-Century British Medical Advertisements,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 28 (1999): 103–30. For an insightful reading that links advertising to the increasingly commercialized depiction of social relationships in the novel, see Jill Campbell, “Domestic Intelligence: Newspaper Advertising and the Eighteenth-Century Novel,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15, no. 2 (2002): 251–91.

he associates with the new consumer-driven economy.²⁰ Like the London marketplace, in which the consumer is secure that “every step which he advances [will] bring something within his view [that] he did not see before,” the newspaper offers its audience a miscellany of “periodical intelligence” that promotes the “amusements of idleness ... without the fatigue of close attention,” since it incessantly displaces the “desires” of the reader from one article to the next. By keeping these desires in a constant state of agitation, the newspaper, Johnson claims, promotes the same state of perpetual distraction that characterizes the “luxurious” consumer, thereby ensuring, as does the commercial market, that readers will not find life “stagnate for want of some desire to keep it in motion.”²¹

Writers who made literary contributions to periodicals—a regular feature of these miscellanies by mid-century—were particularly concerned about such reading practices, which they tended to blame on a mode of production that eliminated the author as a vehicle of coherence. Goldsmith, for example, cites the magazine’s tendency to disperse authorship as one of the primary reasons that his essays get lost amid its heterogeneous collection of articles. Anticipating Adam Smith’s famous example of the division of labour, he complains in the *Bee* (1759) that “a Magazine ... goes through as many hands as a new pin.”²² However, the result of this mode of production is not a single commodity like

²⁰ Johnson’s definition of “intelligence” as “the commerce of information” also makes this connection. See *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 (London, 1756).

²¹ Johnson, *Idler*, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 2:92–93. Johnson’s opinions about newspaper reading were admittedly ambivalent, as DeMaria points out (chap. 5). While Johnson frequently complained about the kind of “browsing” that the miscellaneous content of newspapers encouraged, he was himself an avowed consumer of news and also wrote introductory essays for several newspapers and magazines (176). Italia makes the same argument about Goldsmith, who published most of his critiques of newspapers and magazines within newspapers and magazines themselves (see chap. 5). Smollett’s approach to periodicals would eventually prove equally contradictory. After *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, he published several newspapers and magazines himself and even serialized a novel (*Sir Launcelot Greaves*) in the *British Magazine*. However, this did not keep him from continuing to criticize the public papers and even refusing to review works in the *Critical Review* that had initially appeared in newspapers or magazines (ironically, Goldsmith’s *Citizen of the World* was one such work).

²² Goldsmith, *Bee* no. 1 (6 October 1759), in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 1:354.

the pin but a disparate field of merchandise, unified neither by content nor narrative voice. This cacophonous style encourages the consumer to avoid making distinctions based on literary merit and instead to freely indulge his voracious and indiscriminate “appetite” for textual goods of any kind. To Goldsmith, the consequences for literary contributors like himself are obvious: “Should the labour of a writer who designs his performance for readers of a more refined appetite fall into the hands of a devourer of compilations, what can he expect but contempt and confusion?”²³ After all, this performance would likely meet with the same attention (or lack thereof) that readers devote to the accounts of battles, balls, and horse races that frame it. Like Johnson, Goldsmith claims that this “confusion” keeps magazine readers’ desires in a perpetual state of agitation, which, in turn, furthers their “contempt” for the dispassionate literary essay: “how cold a reception must every effort receive that comes thus endeavouring to regulate the passions, in a place where almost every paragraph tends to excite them.”²⁴ By recharging the passions with every new paragraph, newspapers and magazines discourage the “detachment and disinterestedness requisite for the appreciation of philosophy,” or indeed for any more refined genre of writing.²⁵ Hence, the economy of reading that newspapers and magazines promoted was regarded as a threat not only to commercial but also to literary values.

This nexus between newspaper intelligence, commerce, and literature is at the heart of Smollett’s *Ferdinand Count Fathom*. Frank Donoghue has noted the way in which the villainous Fathom, though “not an author,” is frequently “described in specifically literary terms,” which he interprets biographically as Smollett’s embittered criticism of a literary market that spurned his first play.²⁶ But Fathom is less frequently described as a playwright than as a gatherer and retailer of information. Like the contents of a modern magazine or newspaper, Fathom’s intelligence spans every area of public and private life: politics, commerce, society gossip, even literature. No field of knowledge is beyond his reach. Given his similarity to the periodical, it

²³ Goldsmith, *Bee* no. 1, in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 1:356.

²⁴ Goldsmith, *Lloyd’s Evening Post* (22 January 1762).

²⁵ *Italia*, 215.

²⁶ Frank Donoghue, *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 137.

makes sense that, as Beasley argues, the narrative of his adventures should lack continuity in favour of pure “juxtaposition.” However, I disagree that this constitutes a “principle of order,” for, as we have seen, eighteenth-century magazine and newspaper readers found nothing orderly about such juxtaposition, if they searched for order at all. Fathom’s audience certainly does not. They overlook the superficial, incoherent, and often false nature of his intelligence because it is either more entertaining than the truth or it caters to their desires as luxury consumers.

Fathom’s resemblance to the magazine form begins with his unnatural conception, which seems to be, like Goldsmith’s pin, the product not of one but of many hands. The impossibility of determining his origins “proceeded from the uncertainty of his mother, whose affections were so dissipated among a number of admirers that she could never pitch upon the person from whose loins our hero sprung” (46). The “cloud of witnesses” to his birth expect to establish the father’s identity from the child’s resemblance to him, but Fathom’s newborn face gives away no “visible patrimony,” as if each of his physical features was actually authored by a different contributor. Fathom, like the periodicals that he will come to resemble, is free from the “risque of being claimed by an earthly father” (47), not because his author is anonymous but because he is the compilation of a number of authors, whose multiplicity has dissipated the possibility of authorship itself.

The intelligence that Fathom employs throughout the novel is as miscellaneous as the authors of his being. This intelligence follows the loose organizational structure of a newspaper, beginning with the narrow realm of politics and then expanding willy-nilly to incorporate all aspects of society. Fathom first rises to prominence “in the last year of the renowned Marlborough’s campaign” when he publishes “a piece of intelligence” about a conspiracy to rob Count Melvil, the commander of one of Marlborough’s armies (49). This theme of political intelligence continues when he forges an “alliance” with the Tyrolese sharper Ratchkali to defraud their fellow officers. This alliance functions according to a division of labour that highlights Fathom’s association with news: while Ratchkali hazards the “risk of execution,” Fathom “undertake[s] for the articles of intelligence,” authoring their frauds from a safe distance

(84–85). Smollett continues to describe Fathom's economy of information in political terms throughout the novel, but that economy takes a decided turn when the hero quits the military sphere for the "tents of civil life," where he expands and diversifies his intelligence to suit the attitudes and desires of the reading public at large (123).

After he abandons the army, Fathom sets his heart on England, which Smollett characterizes as the "land of promise" for anyone who deals in the commodity of information. To prepare for the business he expects to conduct there, Fathom supplies himself with a stock of intelligence, both foreign and domestic, that he can use to play upon the credulity of the London public, from whom he predicts that "great profits may be extracted" (199). He first visits Paris—the epicentre of fashionable knowledge—in order to "acquire such intelligence as would qualify him to act a more important part upon the British stage" (124). When he arrives in England, he takes another detour to compile information on the domestic front, "pass[ing] himself upon his fellow travelers for a French gentleman ... in order to glean from their discourse, such intelligence as might avail him in his future operations" (181–82). By the time he arrives in London, Fathom has become a veritable magazine of miscellaneous information. Like the modern periodical writer, his "pretensions to profound and universal knowledge" cover not only politics but also science, the arts and the *beau monde*:

In the midst of a mathematical assembly, he ... intended to gratify the public with a full confutation of Sir Isaac Newton's philosophy ... Among politicians, he settled the balance of power upon a certain footing, by dint of ingenious schemes, which he had contrived for the welfare of Europe. With officers, he reformed the art of war, with improvements which had occurred to his reflection, while he was engaged in a military life. He sometimes held forth upon painting, like a member of the *Dillettanti* club: the theory of music was a theme upon which he seemed to expatiate with particular pleasure: in the province of love and gallantry he was a perfect Oorandates: [and] he possessed a most agreeable manner of telling entertaining stories, of which he had a large collection.

All of Fathom's intelligence falls under the category of "entertaining stories," for the information that he provides is always "much more specious than solid." His success depends not

on the quality of his intelligence but upon its quantity. The “universality” of his discourse, coupled with the “plausibility and confidence” with which he relates it, “is sufficient to dazzle the understanding of half mankind.” The “surprise and admiration” of his public is excited not by the content of Fathom’s relations but by the manner in which he “juggle[s]” them, as one fragment of superficial knowledge succeeds another without order or continuity (202–3).

The popularity of this magazine style threatens the cultural capital of true “literati,” who find themselves “conquered” by the allegiance of Fathom’s new army: the public. Donoghue has emphasized Fathom’s ability to “move from one rhetorical world to another” with surprising ease, but he suffers repeated ridicule and rejection by the scholars who preside over such discourse communities.²⁷ Because the latter have not only mastered the terms of art associated with a given discipline, but also “really understand the art” itself, they are able to distinguish rhetoric from actual learning (222). Consequently, they quickly recognize that Fathom has never done more than “float on the surface” of knowledge, “imbib[ing] a small tincture of ... different sciences” like “those vagrant swallows that skim along the level of some pool or river, without venturing to wet one feather of their wings” (64). However, such proficientes comprise no part of Fathom’s target audience, for in actuality the only “rhetorical world” in which he seeks to gain credit is the one occupied by the general reader. This is apparent in the “confutation of Sir Isaac Newton’s philosophy” that begins the catalogue of discourses quoted above. While he delivers that treatise “in the midst of a mathematical assembly,” it is not intended to impress such experts but to “gratify the public,” whose blind approbation, he realizes, can drown out the criticism of the learned and place an “illiterate pretender” on a footing with them. For example, when he gives a lecture on physic, a doctor in the audience accuses him of being “wholly ignorant” of the subject and proceeds to correct him. However, the public is less impressed with the doctor’s learning than with Fathom’s ceaseless but shallow “flow of language,” which is better “adapted to the understanding of his hearer[s]” because it “amuses” them without making any serious demands on their attention. Consequently this audience, which does not want to

²⁷ Donoghue, 141.

be “perplexed with a great deal of reading,” decides the dispute “in favour of our adventurer” and banishes his antagonist, who “has nothing to recommend himself” besides solid learning (221–22). Thus, the popularity of Fathom’s magazine style threatens the exclusivity of the literary world. To achieve the status of a “member of the *Dilletanti* club,” Fathom demonstrates that one does not need the approval of a David Garrick or a Joshua Reynolds; he circumvents such authorities to court the public instead, manipulating their desire for a variety of shallow discourses, instead of the fruits of “long study and application” (202). Among such a body of ignorant readers, Fathom’s wealth of superficial knowledge, “if managed with circumspection, will enable him ... to spend his life among the literati, without once forfeiting the character of a connoisseur” (202).

Once Fathom establishes his intelligence as “the soul that animated the whole society,” he uses the cultural capital he accumulates from it to prey upon his audience’s “prevailing passion”—their desire for luxury goods—which he accomplishes by adding advertisements to his already miscellaneous periodical discourse. Fathom and Ratchkali establish a “traffick” in counterfeit jewels and antiques that follows their prearranged division of labour: the Tyrolese manufactures the commodity and performs the role of merchant while Fathom publishes the advertisement that initiates the sale. Smollett gives the following example of their commercial practices. Ratchkali, “who was an exquisite lapidary,” sets a poor stone “in such a manner that would have imposed upon any ordinary jeweller,” which Fathom then wears into company (204). When “a certain lady of quality” notices it, he “seize[s] that opportunity of entertaining them with a learned disquisition into the nature of stones.” This is followed by a “history of the diamond in question” and, finally, by a sales pitch, which assures the audience that “the present proprietor could afford to sell it at a very reasonable rate” (204). The lady, impressed as much by this advertisement for the stone as by the stone itself, agrees to the purchase and is referred to Ratchkali, who clears one hundred guineas through the sale, “to be divided betwixt the associates.” Like Johnson, Smollett associates news with the luxury market, both of which rely upon the public’s desire for a miscellany of superficial commodities, whether discursive or material. This alliance is reinforced and broadened

as Fathom expands his business by employing all the “resources of a skillful virtuoso”: “Every auction afforded some picture, in which, though it had been overlooked by the ignorance of the times, he recognized the style of a great master, and made a merit of recommending it to some noble friend. This commerce he likewise extended to medals, bronzes, busts, intaglios and old china, and kept diverse artificers continually employed in making antiques for the English nobility” (205–6). The manufacture of luxury goods therefore comes to depend upon Fathom’s specious advertisements, which “never failed to inflame the desires of his audience”—desires that “diverse artificers” are always on hand to supply with equally specious goods (205).

As such examples illustrate, the province of Fathom’s commerce is again “the arts,” the very survival of which is threatened by the power of this “eminent connoisseur” to conform the taste of his audience to whatever refuse he gives that title. “Nothing was so wretched among the productions of art, that he could not impose upon the world as a capital performance”: shabby paintings replace the works of “great master[s]”; “old crazy fiddles ... thrown aside as lumber” stand in for “the best Cremona[s] (204)”; and Fathom’s own stories—the substance of which is compared to the tawdry French romance *Cassandra*—serve for models of “taste” (203). However, Fathom does not bear sole responsibility for this debasement of the arts. While his advertisements may produce the public’s “infatuation” with objects of inferior artistic merit, Fathom’s popularity is the product of that public’s obsession with fashion, which informs their approach to information. As Erin Mackie has observed, eighteenth-century “news junkies” regarded intelligence as “part of fashionable urban life” and approached it like the other “fashion commodities they so avidly consume[d].”²⁸ The truth of this observation is born out by Fathom’s public, who likewise fail to distinguish between information and other luxury goods: “It was become so fashionable to consult the count in everything relating to taste and politeness, that not a plan was drawn, not even an house furnished without his advice and approbation; nay, to such a degree did his reputation in these matters excel,

²⁸ Erin Mackie, *Market a la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in “The Tatler” and “The Spectator”* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 219–20.

that a particular pattern of paper-hangings was known by the name of Fathom" (206). As in Johnson's depiction of newspaper reading, the public's voracious appetite for luxury turns Fathom's intelligence into a fashionable commodity, which appropriately materializes as a "pattern of paper hangings." However, at the same time, these consumers endow his information with a special power distinct from other commodities, as an index of all that is fashionable. Intelligence therefore transcends the realm of the commodity while remaining firmly embedded in it, becoming simultaneously an object of consumption and the force that mediates commerce itself. This special status enables Fathom to shift the locus of value from the material labour imbedded *in* the object—the "infinite toil and perseverance" of the artist or scholar—to the information that he provides *about* the object, thereby alienating the commodity from its conditions of production and making its value depend on an external force that has become symbolic of value as such.²⁹

The threat that Fathom's economy of information poses to artistic value is also figured as a meta-fictional contest between author and character over the fate of the novel itself. Fathom, as I have noted above, subsumes fictional narratives under the rubric of intelligence, encouraging his audience to consume them in the same way. Whether he is telling "amorous stories" of sexual intrigue to the Countess de Melville, "dismal stories of ... apparitions" to the superstitious Celina, or "entertaining stories" to the public at large, his fictions are always licensed by his "unquestionable" authority as an intelligencer (214). In this role, Fathom likewise usurps the two provinces of any good novelist, character and circumstance: "He dived into the characters of mankind with a penetration peculiar to himself" (69, 143) and "was perfectly master of every circumstance of his situation"—a situation that, up to this point, has constituted the center of the novel itself (186). The very kind of narrative manipulation that Smollett cautioned against at the beginning of the novel seems on the point of fruition, as Fathom threatens to usurp the privileges of the impartial novelist and thereby to become "master" of his own story.

²⁹ As both a commodity and the mediator of value, intelligence here resembles Marx's money form. See Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin and New Left Review, 1976), 222–24.

Smollett stages this threat, however, only to ultimately use it as a means to represent the value of both the novel and its narrator. By including his novel among the other beleaguered works of art that fall sacrifice to Fathom's economy of information, Smollett subtly stakes a claim for the novel itself as a work of art, thereby participating in the reclassification of the genre as part of "literary culture" that William Warner has described in *Licensing Entertainment*. Through "complex patterns of antagonism," Smollett associates the novelist with other "literati" by portraying the periodical culture that Fathom represents as equally dangerous to both.³⁰ Moreover, he uses this contest with his character to stress how the integrity of his medium depends upon the self-sacrificing character of its author, whose function is to protect his readers from Fathom's self-interested fictions of intelligence. Smollett figures the threat that Fathom poses to his novel through a series of authorial intrusions that become more insistent with each of his protagonist's triumphs, finally culminating in the oft-remarked passage where the narrator almost abdicates the role that he had so proudly displayed on the novel's opening page: "Perfidious wretch! Thy crimes turn out so atrocious, that I half repent me of having undertaken to record thy memoirs" (309). Such heavy-handed intrusions have not fared well with critics of the novel, who often point to them as evidence of its "clumsy technical framework." Boucé, for example, argues that these intrusions illustrate Smollett's "total failure" to distance himself from "the world of his characters," thereby violating the promise that the "impartial historian" makes to his readers in the novel's opening pages.³¹ Yet these authorial intrusions actually shore up the novelist's claim to disinterest by associating the author-function with an ethos predicated upon a selfless concern for the reader. The latter can trust the novelist as a "recorder" of events because he is willing to go to any lengths

³⁰ William B. Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 41. For Warner, mid-century novels attempt to create a set of "literary classification[s]" that leave no place for more culturally suspicious members of the genre, like novels of amorous intrigue. Though Smollett's target is different (news rather than other forms of the novel), his goal is likewise to resituate the novel within "literary culture" by pitting it against "media culture," though a media culture defined as much by its obsession with information as by its desire for "entertainment."

³¹ Boucé, 156.

to protect his audience from “crimes” of intelligence, even if this means making the ultimate sacrifice—that is, to stop writing altogether. Smollett’s self-representations therefore serve two rhetorical purposes simultaneously. While they re-emphasize the novel’s claim that periodical intelligence poses a threat to literature by making Fathom’s crimes responsible for the near-death of the novel, they also suggest that the novel is uniquely qualified to combat such crimes because it is mediated by an author who is prepared to forego his own investment in the information he provides. In order to portray the novelist’s selfless approach to information as the key to his genre’s superior narrative economy, Smollett shifts his “principle personage” in the last third of the book from the eponymous villain to the virtuous Renaldo, who exposes Fathom’s crimes by learning a disinterested approach to intelligence that makes him a figure for Smollett’s “impartial” historian.

As a consumer of intelligence, Renaldo is initially governed by the same passionate credulity that defines the rest of Fathom’s public. This similarity is apparent from the moment that he reunites with Fathom in Newgate while on a mission to rescue a poor female relation who is imprisoned, he believes, for debt, like Fathom. When he shows this woman’s letter to Fathom, the latter immediately recognizes her, through a “consciousness of his own practices,” as a fellow participant in the commerce of information—one of those “who make it their business to pick up hints of intelligence relating to private families, upon which they build ... superstructures of fraud and imposition” (279). Noting the ease with which this lady duped Renaldo, who evaluates intelligence not with his head but with his “heart,” Fathom resolves to steal her business for himself. He therefore exposes the false intelligence of his competitor only to “amuse [Renaldo] with a feigned tale” of his own, which prompts the “unsuspecting Hungarian” to once again make a “tender of his purse” (259, 261). Though the motives behind it are certainly more noble, Renaldo’s charity follows a logic similar to the public’s consumption of luxury goods: objects of compassion, like commodities, receive their value through the affect that intelligence produces in the undiscerning consumer. Ironically, it is members of that very public—the nobility that comprise the market for Fathom’s fake antiques—who link Renaldo’s charity

with their own frivolous consumption. When he applies to them for a loan to shore up his fortune, which purchasing Fathom's release had "reduced to somewhat less than thirty [pounds]," they refuse him on the grounds that relieving his friend, at the expense of his own "domestic necessities," was a "piece of wrong-headed extravagance" (261, 266).

This extravagance involves Renaldo in a double bankruptcy, as his implicit faith in Fathom's intelligence leads him not only to give the latter control over his money, but also to "entrust him with" Monimia—"the inestimable jewel of his heart"—who, as we shall see, functions as an over-determined symbol of the commercial, literary, and national values that Smollett associates with the novel. Fathom manipulates the value of this "jewel" in the same manner that he manipulates other commodities (261). Since Renaldo's every minute will be consumed by attempts to rescue his desperate finances, he engages Fathom to "mediate" his relationship with Monimia in his absence, thereby once again making domestic relations depend upon "hints of intelligence." In short order, neither he nor Monimia can act "without the advice and mediation of Fathom," who uses this privileged position to build a "superstructure" of false intelligence upon a base of factual details supplied by the lovers themselves (278). His "gossiping correspondence" with Monimia supplies him with a set of circumstances from which he constructs a plausible account of her inconstancy, which he uses to devalue this "inestimable jewel" in Renaldo's eyes (276). If the authority of the intelligencer had previously enabled Fathom to convert garbage into gold, it here proves equally capable of accomplishing the reverse.

Renaldo's reaction to this intelligence illustrates its "violent" effect upon the passions, which Fathom's public expresses not only through its insatiable commercial appetite, but also through irrational acts of physical violence. As John Sekora points out, Smollett frequently linked luxury consumption to the threat of revolution and accused opposition leaders of using the newspapers to incite both tendencies.³² It should not be surprising that *Ferdinand Count Fathom* includes examples of such media-inspired violence as part of the information culture that it represents. For example, the "intelligence" that

³² See Sekora, chap. 5.

Wilhelmina's mother receives from her "minister" concerning Fathom's infidelity has a "violent effect upon her brain" that would have prompted an "immediate recourse to poison or steel" had she not been restrained (114–15). Don Diego actually perpetrates what the jeweller's wife fails to accomplish, as the faulty "intelligence" that he receives about his daughter's affair with a lowly music master works him into such "an ecstasy of rage" that he stabs both his daughter and wife (172). Renaldo completes this pattern: by making the authority of Fathom's intelligence absolute, he likewise enables "our adventurer [to] become absolute in his power over the passions of his friend" (278). Fathom's "forged detail" of Monimia's infidelity excites these passions to such a pitch that they threaten to materialize in the form of an equally excessive act of violence: "I will act the avenging minister of heaven! I will mangle that fair bosom which contains so false a heart! I will tear her to pieces, and scatter those beauteous limbs, as a prey to the beasts of the field, and the fowls of the air" (283). The description of the affective process that culminates in this imaginary murder supplements the commercial metaphor of the "jewel" with a series of political metaphors, as Fathom's intelligence incites a struggle for the "balance of power" between passion and reason that leaves Renaldo's "bosom" in the condition of a war-torn country: "So violent were the shocks of their successive conflicts that his bosom fared like a wretched province harassed, depopulated, and laid waste" (282). The image of the virtuous Monimia's dismembered body, which prompts Smollett to make his "perfidious wretch" speech, invokes both the commercial and political catastrophes that the author feared awaited a nation where passions could be so easily manipulated through intelligence.

The novel implies that these consequences can only be averted by a readership that takes a more objective and discriminating approach to intelligence, withholding judgment, and therefore action, until they have determined its value. Renaldo and Monimia find such a readership in Joshua Manassach and Madame Clement, who together rescue them from Fathom's clutches. As T.O. Treadwell has noted, both these characters are "aliens in England," an outsider status—shared by Smollett himself—that enables them to remain detached from their environment even as they compassionate the woes of its

inhabitants.³³ This detachment is fundamental to how they consume information. Renaldo visits the money-lender Manassach to request a loan to fund his intended journey back to Hungary, where he hopes to recuperate his finances by reclaiming his estate—a project that Fathom approves because it will give him the opportunity to seduce Monimia. Fathom resolves to support Renaldo's plain account of his circumstances by "exerting that power of eloquence which he had at command" to paint those circumstances in the "most pathetic" light. While Manassach sympathizes with this affecting report, he does not allow his tears to cloud his judgment: "He wiped the moisture from his face, and proceeded in these words: 'Sir, your story is plausible; and your friend is a good advocate: but, before I give an answer to your demand, I must beg leave to ask if you can produce undeniable evidence of your being the identical person that you really assume'" (293). Unlike the general public, the Jewish merchant resists the affective power of Fathom's intelligence and refuses to lay out his money on impulse. Instead, he makes a "minute inquiry ... into the character of Renaldo," gathering and comparing reports that will enable him to determine the value of his purchase. Only when Renaldo is confirmed "by all reports" to be "a youth of strict honour, and untainted morals" does Manassach agree to fund his journey (308). In contrast to Fathom's use of specious intelligence to manipulate the market, the merchant's judicious and impartial approach to information is associated with his fair and honest business practices, as he "refused to take one farthing by way of premium" from Renaldo. Together, these reading and commercial practices make Manassach as "impenetrable" to Fathom as the money-lender's "black and bushy" eyebrows. Since his own commercial methods are his only point of reference, Fathom "scrupled not to impute all this kindness to some deep-laid *interested* scheme, the scope of which he could not at present comprehend" (294; emphasis added). But this inability to fathom Manassach results from his *disinterestedness* as both a reader and a businessman, which makes him impervious to the kind of schemes that Fathom has perpetrated on the public.

³³ T.O. Treadwell, "The Two Worlds of Ferdinand Count Fathom," in *Modern Critical Views: Tobias Smollett*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987). On the "idea of foreignism" in the novel, see esp. 39–43.

Madame Clement evinces these same qualities when she rescues Monimia. In considering whether she should protect her charge or hand her over to Fathom, who claims to be her husband, Madame Clement is confronted by two accounts, one from each of the parties involved. While she “saw truth and conviction in every circumstance of [Monimia’s] tale,” Fathom presents her with an equally “plausible story of his first acquaintance with Monimia, and [their] marriage at the Fleet,” augmented by an account of how Renaldo “seduced the affection of this unfortunate woman.” Though Madame Clement is a “little staggered” at first by his “engaging address,” she remains impervious to its effect and “could not prevail upon herself to believe that she had been imposed upon by her fair lodger.” Nonetheless, rather than impulsively acting on her sympathy for Monimia, she resolves to seek further corroboration. A physician of her acquaintance, who is also a “foreigner,” informs her that “some circumstances of [Fathom’s] story concerning Renaldo were, to his particular knowledge, contrary to truth,” referring Madame Clement to Manassach’s own “minute inquiry” for further confirmation. Such “deliberation” enables her to fathom the intelligence that she has received by juxtaposing these various reports: “comparing the particulars of this account with those of Monimia’s own story, she concluded, that Fathom was the very traitor he himself had described; and that he had, by abusing the confidence of both, effected a fatal breach between two innocent and deserving lovers” (307–8). Her ability to resist the impulsive consumption of a single account in favour of an objective and synthetic approach to the field of intelligence as a whole distinguishes Madame Clement, as it does Manassach, from the general public.

The failure of Fathom’s plot against Monimia through the intervention of these more capable readers marks the beginning of his downfall, which Madame Clement initiates by turning Fathom’s own economy of information against him. When she circulates her own false intelligence of Monimia’s death in order to foil Fathom’s plan to steal this valuable jewel, Madame Clement reveals the weakness of an economy predicated on such an insubstantial form of capital. His monopoly on information suddenly exposed as a fiction, Fathom’s life and livelihood quickly become subject to the intelligence over which he had previously

presided as the exclusive agent. Eager to ruin his principle competitor, Doctor Buffalo conveys “secret intelligence” of Fathom’s plots to seduce young ladies of fashion to their families, who circulate this information among the public (338). The passion of the latter for intelligence of any kind—the basis of Fathom’s economy—now works against him, as he quickly becomes the subject rather than the circulator of information: “At every tea-table, his name was occasionally put to the torture ... At all gossipings ... instances of his ignorance and presumption were quoted, and many particulars were invented for the purpose of defamation; so that our hero was exactly in the situation of a horseman, who, in riding at full speed for the plate, is thrown from the saddle in the middle of the race, and left without sense or motion on the plain” (336–37). This analogy becomes quite literal at the end of the novel. When Doctor Buffalo obtains information that Fathom, after marrying one woman, is trying to improve his fortune by wedding another, he informs the brother-in-law of the intended bride, who—“startled at this intelligence”—prosecutes Fathom for bigamy (344). Though the brother-in-law eventually drops the suit, it “swallowed up all [Fathom’s] ready money,” thereby bringing him to the brink of starvation (337). In a turn of events befitting his crimes, intelligence—the sole substance of Fathom’s character and commerce—ultimately consumes both his body and fortune alike. “Without sense or motion,” Fathom’s existence is finally reduced to nothing more than a scrap of society gossip.

Fathom’s defeat within the novel foreshadows his near disappearance from the novel in the last nine chapters, where he becomes the object of information rather than its purveyor. Released from Fathom’s narrative treachery, the “reader is entertained with a retrospect” of Renaldo’s concurrent transformation into a discriminating reader and writer of intelligence, which qualifies him to replace Fathom as the novel’s “principle personage” (352). This “retrospect” is largely a rewriting of the novel in reverse. As Renaldo travels from London back to Presburg on a mission to “procure intelligence” about his estate, he encounters most of the principle characters from the earlier episodes—his sister, Teresa, Wilhelmina, Ratchkali, and Don Diego—who provide him with information about the schemes that Fathom perpetrated in the first half of the novel (357).

Having now “recovered his perception” through the shock of his complicity in Monimia’s supposed death, Renaldo resolves no longer to judge this intelligence through the lens of desire. Though his “heart began to throb with indignation” at each story of Fathom’s treachery against himself, his family, and his beloved Monimia, “he suppress[e]s the emotion” to objectively determine whether each account is “congruous, consistent and distinct”—narrative qualities that testify to its internal value (381, 367). He then weighs these reports against one another, applying the same criteria that he uses to evaluate each individual text to the process of inter-textual reading. His encounter with Ratchkali illustrates both of these new reading practices. Renaldo first examines his intelligence for internal consistency and completeness, finding it a “regular detail of all the strokes ... practiced upon [himself] and others” (381). He then makes a minute comparison between the particulars of Ratchkali’s account and those he had received from Wilhelmina, Don Diego, and others. This enables him to determine its value: “Renaldo had no reason to doubt the truth of this story, every circumstance of which tended to corroborate the intelligence he had already received” (382).

This new unimpassioned approach to information enables Renaldo to reduce the flood of disjointed episodes in the first half of the novel to a coherent narrative. He completes this task when he masters the final piece of Fathom’s plot through the “intelligence he obtain[s]” from Madame Clement: “The whole mystery of Monimia’s behaviour, which he could not before explain, now stood disclosed before him: he saw the *gradual progress* of that infernal plan, which had been laid for their mutual ruin” (395; emphasis added). To argue, as does Beasley, that “Smollett’s imagination ... apprehends reality in its scattered fragments” rather than through “any conventional logic of fictional form” is to ignore how Renaldo, by taking a disinterested approach to intelligence, is able to give form to those fragments.³⁴ By making the superabundance of Fathom’s disconnected adventures cohere in a single narrative, Renaldo literally “unites the incidents” of the novel itself, thereby performing the role that Smollett ascribes to both the “principle personage” of fiction and to its “impartial” historian. When he usurps this role from

³⁴ Beasley, 174–75.

Fathom, Renaldo likewise illustrates the triumph of the novel—the narrative genre that he now represents—over the magazine form associated with his vanquished antagonist.

The diminishing gap between novelist and character is illustrated most clearly by Renaldo's authorial power over the history of Don Diego, which he manipulates in the same manner as the novelist himself. As Boucé has noted, the second half of the novel is replete with authorial intrusions, in which Smollett parades his omniscience by acknowledging that he is withholding "certain circumstances" (397). These intrusions largely converge with Renaldo's own displays of narrative power, as he slowly divulges a story that he too has withheld from his audience. Renaldo has known all along that Monimia is Don Diego's daughter, but rather than convey this information all at once, he conforms it to the "gradual progress" of narrative. Twice he relates part of the tale to his friends while keeping "some circumstances" in reserve, which Smollett himself assures us "shall in due time be revealed" or "shall appear in due season" (397, 404). With each successive addition to the story, Don Diego, like the reader, becomes "more and more involved in a mystery, which [he] long[s] to hear explained"—a denouement that falls upon the novelist within the novel to provide: "'That shall be my task,' cried Renaldo," who, at last, fills in the gaps of his narrative and, "in a succinct and well-connected detail, explained the whole mystery" (410, 406). Through its consequences, Smollett illustrates the potential of this "well connected" narrative to reform the hasty reading practices that he associates with the magazine's incoherence. While Fathom's disparate intelligence discourages reflection in lieu of immediate gratification, Renaldo's narrative, because its details unfold only "gradually," forces readers to put off such gratification, to stifle their desire to act upon discrete pieces of information and reserve judgment until they have the "whole story." Smollett therefore politicizes one of the most basic characteristics of narrative—that "it can only be 'consumed,' and therefore actualized, in a *time* that is obviously reading time."³⁵ Such consumption depends, for Smollett, on the fact that the narrative is so "well connected," so coherent, that it can only be

³⁵ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 34.

read sequentially—unlike the scattered intelligence of a newspaper, “whose direction is [not] determined by the sequence of images.”³⁶ Don Diego previously illustrated the hastiness and lack of “penetration” that Smollett consistently attributes to the consumers of Fathom’s universal intelligence when he employed Fathom “at first sight” to “procure information and to convert [his] jewels into money,” without waiting (like Manassach) for any evidence that Fathom warrants such “confidence” (178). The gradual progress of Renaldo’s tale—itsself a “recapitulation” of the novel’s earlier episodes, reorganized into a coherent sequence—rehabilitates this penetration, as Don Diego promises, at the narrative’s conclusion, to read characters more closely in future and to withhold his judgment until he is privy to the entire “detail.”

Smollett figures Renaldo’s narrative triumph by returning to him “the all-accomplished Monimia,” whose revival from the grave personifies the restored health of both a nation and a narrative nearly dismembered and “laid waste” through the affective force of Fathom’s intelligence. The hyper-fictional setting of the reunion scene, for which Smollett draws upon literary devices associated with both romance and the Gothic, encourages the reader to associate the return of Monimia’s “substance” with the novel, while at the same time discouraging the reader from treating that genre as mere fiction: “This is no phantom! This is no shade! This is the life!” (400). The true phantom, according to the novel, is Fathom, whose insubstantial body is on the way to the grave as the “transcendent beauty” of Monimia’s emerges from it: “[he was] stretched almost naked upon straw, insensible, convulsed, and seemingly in the grasp of death. He was wore to the bone either by famine or distemper; his face was overshadowed with hair and filth; his eyes were sunk, glazed and distorted; his nostrils dilated; his lips covered with a black slough, and his complexion faded into a pale clay-colour” (431). The revived Monimia and the expiring Fathom not only represent the two antagonistic literary forms at the heart of the novel, but also serve as indices for their relative value. Monimia’s body, enfolded in the arms of Renaldo, illustrates the “substance” of his coherent narrative—emblematic, as we have seen, of the novel itself. Fathom’s body, with its face obscured and its flesh

³⁶ Genette, 34.

emaciated, is the mere shadow of substance, a grotesque personification of the fragmented, empty, and meaningless nature of his “universal knowledge” and its magazine form.

In the end, Renaldo controls both bodies, and the manner in which he disposes of them reflects the distance that he has achieved from the general public, as well as his desire to replace that public with a more disinterested, and therefore discriminating, community of readers. Though he decides to treat the dying Fathom with compassion, Renaldo’s charity no longer resembles the public’s indiscriminate manner of consumption. Instead, he carefully apportions his benevolence to the value of its object: he “resolved, with the approbation of all present, to settle [Fathom] in a cheap country in the North of England ... until his behaviour should entitle him to a better provision” (440). By banishing Fathom to the distant reaches of England, Renaldo acts in the interest of the public, performing what he calls “the duty of every man to contribute his whole power in freeing society from ... a hypocrite” whose brand of commerce threatens the very existence of “virtue and plain-dealing” (396). However his consideration for the public is as economical as his private support of Fathom; until they reform their manner of consuming both goods and texts, they deserve no “better provision” than bare protection from themselves. Renaldo therefore resolves not to circulate his “inestimable jewel” among the public but to disseminate it only to those who can appreciate its value: “far from wishing to hoard up his treasure, he meant to communicate and diffuse it to all his friends” (402). These friends (Madame Clement, Manassach, and the rehabilitated Don Diego) represent a community of like-minded readers who share the author’s ability to distinguish the virtues of true narrative “substance” from the vices of superficial and misleading intelligence. The treasure that Renaldo communicates to them is, of course, the novel itself—the adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom pared down and reorganized. Renaldo replaces a fashionable public obsessed with the consumption of goods and information with a more discerning audience of novel readers, who reject the unruly desires of that public to “take pleasure” in the author’s prudent economy of narrative (411). It is to such an audience—one capable of following the author’s example of disinterest and discernment—that Smollett entrusts England’s economic, political, and literary future.

Smollett's representation of the difference between periodical and novelistic modes of intelligence provides an early glimpse into the socio-economic conditions that helped to shape the modern author-function. The outcome of this dialectic seems to confirm Clifford Siskin's insightful argument that the principle of "author-before-work" originated around mid-century as a mechanism to "facilitate and control the flow between print production and knowledge consumption," while at the same time offering readers a paradigm for the "flow of capital." Siskin, however, finds the origins of this principle in periodicals, which he argues presented personable author figures that encouraged "economic growth at mid-century" by embodying the functions of both labour and capital.³⁷ The romantic novel, he says, would later inherit both the principle of author-before-work and its economic implications. My reading of *Ferdinand Count Fathom* seeks to complicate these "historical connections between authorship and economic change."³⁸ Smollett depicts the relationship between periodicals and novels as a dynamic struggle over the future of authorship, one grounded in his concern that the heterogeneous content of periodicals served to disperse the author-function rather than to foreground it. The "character" of the novelist, he implies, is necessary to subordinate this unlimited flow of intelligence to a "well-connected" narrative that both embodies and encourages a more prudent economy of information than the one promoted by newspapers and magazines. For Smollett, the principle of author-before-work functions not to "accelerate economic growth" but to place limits on consumption. In his approach to information, the novelist models an economy of reading that emphasizes discrimination over distraction, detachment over desire—one that Smollett believes can inform healthier consumer practices beyond the realm of literature.

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³⁷ Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700–1830* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 162–63.

³⁸ Siskin, 160.