

Horace Walpole's Career

By Louis Kronenberger

OSCAR WILDE said of the English aristocracy that it was the very best thing the English had done in the way of fiction. Certainly it has given us not only many characters that the most enterprising novelist would have been delighted to invent, but many besides that no self-respecting novelist would have dared to. Consider that highborn Victorian lady who woke one night to feel hands moving back and forth, back and forth, over her bed. Too terrified to scream, she held her breath; the motions ceased at last and, too terrified to move, she finally fell asleep. When she woke in broad daylight, she discovered that her butler had been walking in his sleep and had laid the table for eight on her bed. Could even Dickens have imagined that? Yet people like that dart, again and again, in and out of Horace Walpole's letters; are at times, indeed, the very stuff of it.

But the English aristocracy is more than a field for anecdote, as equally the letters of Horace Walpole are more than a fund of it. During the eighteenth century the aristocracy not only ruled Great Britain; it forged, if it sometimes fettered, taste; it commanded a style; it perfected an attitude; it established a way of life. Despite Wilde, it was not fiction but fact: a great fact: a great force; and in its composure, its scepticism, its arrogant freedoms, its tyrannical forms, it was a supreme embodiment of worldliness. In Horace Walpole it found not at all a simple mirror: were he only that, however great he might be as a worldling turned social historian, he would have no place in literature. That he has, we know, a very marked place, that his letters have a persisting allure, comes from his possessing no less distinctive a temperament than an eye; from, also, a certain ambivalence of approach in him, which must mock at what most delights it, and be dismissive of what it succumbs to.

If you are the son of a prime minister, you can become many things yourself. If, indeed, you share some of your father's genius, like the

younger Pitt, you can become prime minister yourself. If, on the other hand, you are as finicking as your father was bluff, as waspishly well-bred as your father was carelessly open-handed, you will use your place in the world to observe rather than participate. You will much less want to make news than be always the first to report it. Horace Walpole had the *entrée*; he had, very early, a well-trained eye; and very early, in Horace Mann at Florence and in a number of other correspondents, he had an attentive audience. Had all his other correspondents perished, Horace Mann alone would have given Walpole a posterity. But most of the other correspondents lived rather extended lives, while Walpole himself lived on until eighty—so that he presents us with a just sufficiently altering England under a number of rulers and régimes, and at the same time a just appreciably altering Walpole.

IN SOME WAYS, he does not alter at all. A conscious artist, he remains detached in much that he observes, but he is obsessed with observing. Again, he makes light of things, but he never makes light of the business of making light of things. He is probably the greatest artist in gossip in England literature, yet that does not really characterise him or constitute a wholly sound unit of measurement. It would be like calling Pope no more than an artist in abuse. Walpole in his letters has a real place, a real value, from constituting the voice of his age and class, and yet having a very particular accent of his own. To us he seems, as he essentially was, a notable member of the *ancien régime*; yet in his own time there was something fashionably *avant-garde* about him too, something of the innovator, who invented his own fopperies, who transplanted his own fiction from the medieval, who translated his own pleasures from the French. In a dilettante way he constantly adds something to what he embodies; as ultimately, in his dilettante way, he subtracts

something. Walpole's own social world, we can feel pretty sure, treated him as a kind of pet eccentric, regarded him as a kind of privileged sniffer, and consulted him with a certain faintly contemptuous deference.

THERE WAS MUCH to consult him about. He had the eighteenth-century patrician's horror of being a professional, yet could say with much truth, in his amateur fashion, that "no profession comes amiss to me—from tribune of the people to a habit-maker." We, after two centuries, remember him as a printer, an adventurous house-builder, an M.P., an antiquary, a historian, a novelist, a playwright, and above all a letter-writer; and in his own age he must have seemed one of the very greatest of collectors—if of *bons mots* pre-eminently, yet of *objets d'art* as well. And for such a role in life it was important that he have a retinue of intelligencers, of eavesdroppers, of drawing-room spies. It was not enough that the supreme social chronicler of his age should be able to go everywhere or meet every one; he had to have, as it were, a deputy in a corner of every room, at each end of every dinner table. In his own high-styled way he ran a kind of factory of anecdote and gossip and news, with duchesses doing piece-work and cabinet ministers tying up parcels and ambassadors acting as delivery boys. But it was all hand-made, as durably elegant as Sheraton sideboards or Lamerie silver: it was not just transferred and recorded, it was transformed by Walpole, in the end, into great letter-writing.

Far from being an accidental virtue, the letter-writing was a premeditated, an almost predestined medium. Though aimed at posterity, it remained in its own time private, offered to a suitably appreciative few. With the secrets of society never peddled to the outside world, there was no need, for the most part, to dot *i*'s. And in all this the point of view has acted as a preservative. The immense amount of mere information which Walpole's letters provide would make them an indispensable source book, but no more than that. The cultivated reader does not, however, take up the letters for mere information; having taken them up for pleasure, he puts them down having been often very pungently informed; but always as much held by style as by substance, and by a strong imprint of personality. A distinctive eighteenth-century merit is how well it mingles a form of tradition and the individual talent; how one eighteenth-century master of language after another both evokes his era and leaves his own signature:

Proud to catch cold at a Venetian door
—that must surely be Pope;

Solitude is dangerous to reason without being favourable to virtue

—that can only be Johnson. And so with Walpole:

The first step toward being in fashion is to lose an eye or a tooth. . . . Not that I complain: it is charming to totter into vogue.

"Totter into vogue": Walpole's gift for phrase, beyond what it conveys of personality, lies in what it imparts of place, in its sense of *town*. Rather than *rus in urbe*, Walpole represents *urbs in rure*; he represents artifice in Nature, elegance in *déshabillé*, the hedge that is both ornament and impassable boundary. He stands, very often, for the greenhouse, the band-box, Marie Antoinette's dairy. He has some of the quality of the best society verse, with its neat *touchés*, its cool diminutive glitter. The universe, with Walpole, suddenly turns into a ballroom, the Trojan War into a hair-pulling match. This small, myopic purview is one way—perhaps the only way—to see things steadily and see them whole; for, among other things, it sees them framed. Being a century of consolidation, of putting man's house in order after all the discoveries and upheavals of the century before, the eighteenth century in England, by narrowing its horizons, by slowing down its pace, could just enclose life into something manageable and precise. But, if all this is myopic, it is not really blinkered. If it is miniature and toylike, it is not entirely frivolous. At least it enables us to see a *way* of life steadily, with its great orderly host of details. Walpole, moreover, is in one sense as thorough and concrete a realist—and a materialist—as Defoe is in another. Again, because Walpole fights all the century's wars with tin soldiers, or fills England's parliaments and administrations with puppets, is not to say that he is a bad critic of them, or even a bad reporter. His mock-heroic approach must be allowed for, but constitutes an offset to the all-too-heroic approach; and, under the aspect of eternity, may well come closer to the truth. Curiously enough, Horace Walpole's father became, with just as disenchanting and worldly a view of things, the greatest and most useful of English administrators. Sir Robert's administrations were decidedly made up of—or turned into—puppets; and tin soldiers or real ones, he would fight no wars at all. There may be a certain irony in the fact that Sir Robert was as excessively philistine as Horace could be over-exquisite, but there is no real contradiction. Common-sense governed the father's life as its blood-brother, worldliness, governed the son's. And in both men, in the one by way of experience, in the other of temperament, a certain cynicism predominated.

TAKE FROM Horace Walpole what makes him an incomparable storehouse of gathered fact and a superb writer of letters, and he emerges a recurrent type of all cultivated societies, someone who is about equally at home in the social world and the artistic one, and who in the final sense is conceivably not quite at home in either. His genius for letter-writing aside, he stands forth a familiar dilettante diner-out, an elegantly fussy bachelor, a delicately feline observer, dainty about food but greedy about gossip; very thin-skinned and vain; a connoisseur of wit, and an even greater connoisseur of social oddities and human blemishes. Walpole carefully examined every ointment on the chance of discovering a fly; hopefully tested every man's armour for chinks; and, I venture to suppose, went constantly to parties not so much to have a good time as to come away with a good story. And yet in all this, he is not to be thought unpleasant; there was less malice in it than sense of *métier*. As Beau Brummell dressed for future ages, or Lucullus dined, so Walpole, we may say, dined out. But he had more laborious pursuits. From his piecrust-battlemented house at Twickenham, from Strawberry Hill, we can almost date the Gothic Revival in English architecture; from his dungeon novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, we can almost date the Gothic Revival in English fiction. To be sure, a long suppressed romanticism was waiting in the wings to dash out upon the English scene; and if it leaned towards histrionics that was in part from its having not yet regained a human identity. But Walpole may have all the more romanticised the past from a strong need to satirise in the present; in addition, being habituated to a world of glitter, he might chiefly find romance in a world of gloom. He was, in any case, the historian of his own age alone; in terms of ages past, he was simply antiquary or melodramatist.

At Strawberry, however, he set up a printing press whose productions are still collected; and his *Memoirs* of the reign of George III, by totally lacking genius, possess solid virtues of

documentation. At Strawberry also—it is one reason why Walpole built it—he remained by himself or with one or two close friends for long periods; he rusticated and read, he received tidings by the incoming post and recast them for the outgoing one. It is necessary to note these withdrawals from society, this faintly ostentatious solitude; and as time passed Walpole, as he said, was to find it pleasantest to pay all his visits by letter. For he had that bachelor-breed characteristic, a good deal of tender sensibility which could make him, when aroused, exceedingly squeamish; and, when ruffled, extremely ill-natured. He had also a good deal of the snob

in him. With his taste for special sauces, his snobbery had a peculiar flavour of its own—he was rather snobbish about snobs. More to his credit, he professed the 18th-century ideal of the aristocratic republican; though, when the French Revolution threatened to make a republic of England, it vanished. But for working people, even for workers on strike, he had much sympathy and even genuine feeling. On the other hand, for everything bourgeois, or that seemed to him bourgeois, for anyone with the slightest tradesman touch, or even with perfectly good professional standing, he showed scorn and contempt.



HORACE WALPOLE

WALPOLE RUNS TRUE TO type, again, in being—as a weathercock of taste—more gilded than dependable; in being often the dupe of fashion, or too inadaptably fastidious. It is always instructive to glance back along the corridors of criticism and see how many responsive, even distinguished, critics lacked—in terms of their great contemporaries—perception or sympathy, or even interest. But about the dislikes and mistakes of a Horace Walpole we can establish a kind of pattern. It is not just that his perspectives are too fixed, or his tastes too feminine. It is that Walpole forever cultivates a lesser thing at the expense of a greater; that his feeling for Gothic is really a love of rococo, that his sense of the visionary is in essence a taste for the lurid, that Heaven, for him, is hardly more than a garden and Hell hardly more than a grotto. He

stands, of course, at the 18th-century point when the classical and the romantic would mate to produce that slight if charming period thing, the picturesque. Walpole was himself, indeed, a bit of a matchmaker in the alliance, in the course of which he could be something of an offender, too—one who worshipped winking idols and followed wandering lights. Strawberry Hill becomes a footnote in the revival of Gothic by virtue of having been something of a travesty on it. And that Walpole could not abide Chaucer or Michelangelo; that he could sniff, or snipe, at half the most enduring of his contemporaries, at Johnson, at Sterne, at Boswell, and eventually at Gibbon: if this is a kind of object-lesson in the vagaries of taste, it is an even better one in the limitations of tastefulness. There was, however, another and very 18th-century element involved. It might be less at times that Walpole couldn't get inside a Dr. Johnson's mind than that he couldn't get past his manners; less that he couldn't perceive Gibbon's greatness as a writer than that he pounced on his petty vanities as a man.

YET, BEFORE we speak of what lifts Walpole above mere type, of what at his best he did so perfectly, we must note the presence of genuine character and feeling in him, and of a kind, moreover, to charm or touch us. Thus, for one example, when his cousin General Conway lost his Court and Army posts, Walpole at once sat down and wrote a notably warm and generous letter, putting half his fortune at Conway's disposal. Like many touchy men Walpole had a great need for friends, and a certain real if complicated talent for friendship. At times his prickliness proved costly, though in the end he would assume the blame. How 18th-century a tone hovers over his years-after comment on the quarrel with Gray: "He loved me, and I did not think he did." Early and late Gray and Bentley, George Montague and John Chute, General Conway and Horace Mann were objects of his interest and affection; as were a succession of great ladies, along with nieces of Walpole's who turned into great ladies; and as finally, late in life, were the Miss Berrys. Meanwhile there was his career, his recording the life of his times in letter form. We pass with him from Ranelagh to the opera, from Houghton to Knole, now to a masquerade, now to a *fête champêtre*; to Oxford, Cambridge, Paris; to a great ball, a midnight fire, a dinner party where dinner, awaiting M.P.s, is three times brought to the table and three times taken away. We accompany Walpole to an auction of pictures, to Charles Fox losing a fortune at Brooks', to a conversation with Hogarth, a social call with Gibbon, a visit with Gray; now there is rioting

over Wilkes, and now over Catholics; someone resigns, someone else elopes, someone else expires.

It resembles a great one-man news chronicle, with a beruffled columnist flavour. Do we want military comment?—there is the surrender at Yorktown:

Well—there ends another volume of the American war. It looks a little as if the history of it would be all we should have for it, except forty millions of debts, and three other wars that have grown out of it.

Theatrical comment?—Walpole went to Drury Lane, the play was *Cymbeline*, and seemed, he says, "as long as if everybody in it went really to Italy in every act, and came back again." Political comment?

The Duke of Dorset retires with a pension of £4000 a year, to make room for Lord Gower, that he may make room for Lord Temple. Lord Geo. Sackville forces out Lord Barrington from Secretary at War, who was going to resign with the rest for fear Mr. Fox *should*. . . . Lord Hardwicke, young disinterested creature, waits till something drops.

Shall it be comment on *décor*? "Blenheim looks like the palace of an auctioneer who has been chosen King of Poland." Or Walpole will write about nothing at all with that touch that proclaims the born letter-writer. "If you was dead," he tells Richard Bentley,

to be sure you would have got somebody to tell me so. If you was alive, to be sure in all this time you would have told me so yourself. If you are not dead, I can tell you who is: don't be alarmed, it's only the Queen-Dowager of Prussia.

Or take this, with its suggestion of Congreve:

Soh! Madam . . . it is very hard one can't come into your house and commend anything but you must recollect it and send it after one! I will never dine in your house again; and, when I do, I will like nothing; and when I do, I will commend nothing; and when I do, you shan't remember it. . . . I wonder you are not ashamed—I wonder you are not ashamed. Do you think there is no such thing as gluttony of the memory?

But in Walpole's letters there are the big scenes too, the epistolary tapestries—the coronation of George II, the events of the Gordon Riots, the beheading of the Jacobite lords:

Then came old Balmerino, treading with the air of a general. As soon as he mounted the scaffold, he read the inscription on his coffin, as he did again afterwards. He then surveyed the spectators . . . and pulling out his spectacles, read a treasonable speech. . . . He said, if he had not taken the sacrament the day before, he would have knocked down Williamson, the lieutenant

of the Tower, for his ill usage of him. . . . Then he lay down; but being told he was on the wrong side, vaulted round, and immediately gave the sign by tossing up his arm, as if he were giving the signal for battle.

Most of the time, of course, Walpole paints in the author while painting his scenes. "I could not help reflecting," he wrote once, "that living always in the world makes one as unfit for living out of it, as always living out of it does for living in it." This we may regard as a classic statement for the Walpole type, for the wordling temperament. For them, *urban* and *urbane* are one; culture and convenience are one; society is more fundamental than humanity. The ennui of the dinner party is for them a pretended affliction, quite unlike that solitary confinement called staying at home. Such men as these may yawn over the eternal sameness of things, but what a scent they have for novelty—for the new play, the latest witticism, last night's gaffe, this morning's gossip. They may grumble about *plus ça change*, but what they grumble over is at bottom what they desire. For they want the old reassuring faces quite as much as they enjoy the new look; with them, there exists that familiar social paradox—life, to be exhilarating, must shift with the speed and colour of a kaleidoscope; yet, where one's comfort and poise are concerned, it must not shift at all.

THIS LOVE OF THE BRAVURA, the bagatelle, the fashionable *frisson*, this emerging a *petit maître* or a connoisseur—every word describing these things is naturally a foreign one: it is from the long recital of such cravings and ambitions that we may insist on bringing larger values to bear. Yet we cannot deny that in his way Walpole is a decided master, who defines as he portrays, and who portrays a great deal. Here, figuratively, we are given all but the best in

18th-century music and painting, all but the finest Mozart or Watteau. Here, too, is almost everything we appreciate in a period's landscape, domestic architecture, and social art. In other words, here is that sense of style, at once careless and starched, frivolous and elegiac, that, if it went into curtsies and bows, and compliments and insults, and picnicking and dancing and duels, went also into how men painted and wrote, and certainly not least, wrote letters. Of letter-writing there has been no more resplendent age.

THE LARGER VALUES are for the most part all too obvious—humanity automatically reinstates *itself* above society, or life above a way of life. Of Walpole himself, however, we might still ask, why a *Castle of Otranto* and not a *Way of the World*? But then he, or you, may answer that he gave us precisely that. If we persist, and start bringing in, say, Proust, there is—even before we get round to the question of creative gifts—Walpole's wholly unphilosophic mind. He pictured society, he did not probe it; he saw Time not as theme or ironic hero, but as winged charioteer; as belonging to elegy, not epic. Yet he did very well by Time, by some sixty years of it, with a quill pen and sealing-wax. He did very well by himself, indeed he fulfilled himself, through making his limitations his ally. He was not of ample or porous enough mind to assimilate anything *really* new, so that for all his love of the last word in walking sticks or smart slang, in decoration or duplicity, Walpole, to the revolutionary voices of his age, seemed blind, deaf, insensible, uninterested, alien. He cultivated his garden, indeed; and so beautifully that nowhere else, nowhere untidier, was he really at ease, or at home, or himself.

Richard Eberhart

Tones of Evening

If I could only express
The mauve light of a Spring evening,
If I could only catch the words on the wing,
The spectacular mauve of a Spring evening,
If I could only capture the cries
Of Canadian geese flying north in April,
If only the light, incomparable, would never diminish,
If only the love of the world were ever total,
If ever the love we feel and cherish
Were never destroyed by fate to make us fatal,
If only the incomparable light through the window
Of the soul as through the window in the evening
Could exist immiscible, be immitigable,
And if only the poem were perfect,
As we dream perfection when our love is strongest,
If I could only express mauves of an inexpressible ineluctability,
The deeper tones that are coming through the window,
The darker statures that are standing in the soul,
The radiancy of the language that is elusive,
Angels that protect us from the darkening of the evening,
The deeper tones that are of a strong imperfection,
And darkness now appears upon the panes,
The dark substratum strains to meet the intellect,
The unalterable truth raves about the street,
If I could only express superiority
To devils and angels to be free,
I would penetrate the great, shadowy stage
On which the highest words are thrown, and save.

Fishing for Snakes

Fishing for snakes
In the wide well of summertime
Depends upon the kind of rake
Best nets their slidy shine.
They will slip a butterfly net,
Which is too delicate, unsubtle,
But if persistent you can catch them yet,
On your belly in a downward effort.
It is an extension of the hand
Is the rake like a fan, and firm,

Wide, with fingers in a fixed half clench
Will sweep the well and fault their swim.
It is all a kind of trick,
Obscured in method, but never despair.
After exertion, with a certain flick,
You can fling them up in the air.
I don't say that I would kill one,
Although this is nothing to shun,
But I like to see the fellows run,
Wriggling away in an evil sun.