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978-0-521-07513-8 - Sterne's Fiction and the Double Principle

Jonathan Lamb

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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Apart from modesty, there is not much reason to make an apology for a new book on Sterne. There is no flood of essays and monographs threatening to drown it in superfluity, nor any prior brisk debate to make it seem to have missed the tide of fashionable polemic. In the ferment of the last decade, Richardson is the only male novelist of the eighteenth century to have benefited. *Clarissa* has been the object of critical and theoretical discussion whose freshness and energy have spilled over into what used to be the deserts of eighteenth-century literature – novels by women – and made them bloom again.<sup>1</sup>

Sterne's failure to share in this harvest – not to mention Fielding's or Smollett's – is worth thinking about. After his rehabilitation earlier this century, his popularity and semi-canonical status in the ranks of English literature were probably bound by the nature of things to wane. More specifically, his Whiggish centrism, his weakness for sly innuendos about female sexuality, and the anti-feminist readings some of his stories will bear, have appealed less and less to readers who expect a more candid and less marginalising approach to sexual politics in fiction. *Tristram Shandy* must strike them as the sort of novel Robert Lovelace would have written, had he lived long enough to find impotence a joke. Richardson's stock has risen precisely because he dramatises the sort of conflict that develops between a female reader and Sterne. *Clarissa*'s contempt for narrow views, bawdy talk and the sexualising arts of her lover might be echoed by Tristram's 'madam' if she had a voice of her own.

Richardson's reappropriation of this voice on behalf of women, principally by idealising the familiar letter while using it as the narrative device of his novels, has brought his work within the scope of one of the most interesting debates about eighteenth-century fiction. Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*, both addressed to the problems of interpretation arising from Rousseau's pursuit of candour, have been

1 Since this book has been finished, two full-length studies of *Tristram Shandy* have appeared: Wolfgang Iser, *Tristram Shandy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), and Ruth Whittaker, *Tristram Shandy* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988). Max Byrd's *Tristram Shandy* (London, Methuen, 1985) offers a detailed and useful survey of post-war Sterne criticism.

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extraordinarily stimulating for readers who have admired Richardson's achievement while remaining sceptical of some of his assumptions about the originality and sincerity of epistolary correspondence. The question of writing's relation to identity and difference has contributed a theoretical rigour to discussions of Richardson which I (on Sterne's behalf) find enviable. Sterne's experiments in language and form, once considered so important to the formalist and modernist projects, have settled into proverbiality at the very time when the Pyrrhonist agility of poststructuralist criticism is worthy of the subtler effects of his applied scepticism. I have in mind his fondness for the undecidable in puns, propositions of identity, and storytelling, closely associated with his ability to run series and sequences in reverse, so that straightforward words came back as palindromes. Unless it is that sceptical readers need texts like Richardson's, which roundly condemn (at least at their margins) the decadence of applied doubt and so leave room for deconstructive manoeuvre, it seems both unfair and odd that Sterne should have been neglected by literary theorists. When they have given him a reading – J. Hillis Miller in his essay 'Narrative Middles' and Terry Eagleton (very briefly) in his book on Walter Benjamin, for example – the results have been exciting.

The seasonal rise and fall of literary reputations has not been altered for the better in Sterne's case by the appearance of the definitive Florida edition of *Tristram Shandy*, which came out first in two handsomely bound but critically naked volumes in 1978, followed by a volume of appended notes in 1984. Although all readers of Sterne must be grateful for the work of the Florida annotators, an unhappy result of their labours has been to re-position Sterne in a grid of borrowings, quotations and allusions that considerably restricts the freedom to read beyond the annotated pale. Melvyn New sets out these restrictions in a couple of essays where he describes the annotator's job as mediation between the uninformed reader and the potentially infinite library predicated as Sterne's source. In his rather odd image, the annotator is posted at the 'backside' of the Sternean text, reporting to an eager audience on the provenance of what passes through, and consoled for the meanness of his position by the conviction that the more he notes of this fattening stream, the more he will have to note: 'the end is nowhere in sight'.<sup>2</sup> The original anxiety of the annotator – that his author has read more books than he has – descends to the reader, who is staggered at the extent and detail of the reports he receives, and wonders nervously if he or she is 'getting' or 'missing' the good things that come bobbing down the current. New compares this scene of instruction to the cracking of a joke: 'some will "get" the joke; others

2 Melvyn New, '“At the backside of the door of purgatory”: A Note on Annotating *Tristram Shandy*', in *Laurence Sterne: Riddles and Mysteries*, ed. Valerie Grosvenor Myer (London: Vision Press, 1984), p. 22. See also the introduction to Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn and Joan New, 3 vols. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1978–84), III, 1–31.

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will not “get” it; and others, of course, will think they understand when in reality they do not’. The annotator does his duty by ‘forcing all his readers to “get” a text I am certain all will miss on first reading’ (pp. 15, 17). If the absolutes jostling the reader in that sentence seem at odds with the relativising tone adopted elsewhere, it is because the challenge of ‘where to start, and where to stop’ in the endless stream of the ‘gettable’ is risen to by the annotator, not by the reader. Like Toby’s mediated encounter with Slawkenbergius, the reader of the annotated Sterne is expected ‘to *hold* the grains and scruples of learning, —not to *weigh* them’.

I think it is a pity to strip initiatives from readers in this way, especially in view of the great lengths taken by Sterne to extend them. It is a greater pity to make the sly innuendo exemplary of the annotatable crux in his fiction, because it inflects the question of ‘where to start, and where to stop’ with the most unhappy blend of seductiveness and aggression. The reader is transformed into ‘madam’, and the scene of instruction is tilted towards the boudoir, where she will be taught to shed her prudish ‘reluctance to follow the possibilities of Sterne’s humour’ and learn to do without punctilios ‘that do seem to have something to do with delicacy’ (New, ‘Annotating *Tristram Shandy*’, p. 16). Threatening to teach the coy reader a thing or two is a species of annotative truculence not limited to the Florida edition and its apologetics. In his essay on Earl Wasserman, Neil Hertz has very deftly handled the intonation and the drift of the classic annotative question, ‘How far can I go?’ And he has pointed out that in the economy of annotation at least, the bid-dable reader has no choice but to yield the power of setting limits to the doughty guardian of the nether reaches: the annotator himself.<sup>3</sup> The taste for having one over on the reader evidently increases with its indulgence, since W. G. Day, another of the Florida annotators, has now annotated a bibliography of recent critical work on Sterne in which he is moved to record his appreciation as follows, ‘This piece has style and ideas’, and ‘this piece has panache’ (‘Annotated Bibliography’, in Myer, *Laurence Sterne*, pp. 174–5).

Are we to say that Sterne’s readers ask for it? – that they are stupid not to know, or to have forgotten, that to pick up one of his books is to enter into a series of tricky negotiations with other books? I think they deserve more credit for responding to the rhetorical impact (as opposed to the intentional line) of Sterne’s composite texts. His borrowing Montaigne on the topic of borrowing, or plagiarising Burton’s attack on plagiarism – favourite examples among readers who have a fondness for Sterne’s reflexive bent – shift the emphasis from borrowing as an annotatable quantum to borrowing as a trope, or a figure of rhetoric. For my part, I became fascinated by just this sort of performed pun, or pleonasm, in Sterne’s fiction, and spent many an

3 Neil Hertz, ‘Two Extravagant Teachings’, in *The End of the Line* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 150, 159.

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unprofitable hour trying to account for it. What I came up with is contained in the following pages, where I argue that this use of literary fragments is not the key to some enormously clever puzzle whose clues we go on solving in the hope of total disclosure; rather the opposite, that they are a tactical and tough-minded experiment with privation, breach, shortage and emptiness. They are 'fragments' on fragments, just like the borrowings and plagiarism committed by that notoriously incomplete autobiographer, Tristram Shandy, by way of self-supplement. This invites us to consider these exotic bits and pieces not as the language of an ultimately decipherable message, but as parts of a figurative arrangement whose efficacy lies in its unannotatable ambiguity. It will quickly become apparent that my hobbyhorse is the embroidering of the difference between figurative language which is irreducibly equivocal and the kind of joking favoured by Professor New, which disguises a literal meaning or image under a specious show of wit. The pleonasm is the best example of the first, as tautology is of the second.

It was not until I read Derrida's essay on the *pharmakon* in *Dissemination* that the range of Sterne's scepticism began to be fully apparent to me. Before that I had assumed that he was a comic platonist, recommending and even idealising the harmony of 'tune' of the eccentric proprieties of such humorists as uncle Toby, who evince the sentimental balance Richardson calls the 'consentaneousness' of thought and feeling. The discovery that this was not so, and that his fiction would stand and even reward the most unremitting of cross-grained readings, coincided with a re-reading of *A Passage to India*, and my first inkling of what Forster meant when he said that muddle ruled *Tristram Shandy*. Made to sound like a cosy platitude, his judgment is the most mordant estimate of the uncanniness and even the terror that skirts Sterne's comic enterprise. Since then I have found the Book of Job more and more important in the constellation of texts of which Sterne's form a part.

Addison's *Spectator* papers, it seems almost trite to say, have an importance out of all proportion to their size and modest bearing. It took a long time and a good deal of reflection before the immense usefulness of Addison's formulation of the double principle became apparent to me, particularly in orienting Sterne's novels towards associationist psychology and the aesthetics of the sublime. That the most complex and powerful sentiments arise from a coalition of an impression and an idea which cannot conceal the imperfection of their union, but can exploit it, is the founding premise of the following discussion, and one that Addison seems to have understood fully when he briefly outlined it in his papers on the pleasures of the imagination. In pursuing this line in psychology and aesthetics, Locke's importance in the Shandean web of relations shrinks somewhat, and Hartley's and Hume's grows much larger. I think that is a good thing on more accounts than my own. With Locke less salient it becomes easier to see how much Montaigne contributes to the structure and the reading of the Shandean sublime.

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Here I am talking of authors not as influences, I hasten to add, but as possibilities of reading. Yet an instinctive preference for reading Sterne primarily through eighteenth-century texts, and largely in eighteenth-century terms, explains why Derrida's theorisation of writing remains untouched in this argument, and why Bakhtin's of dialogism is only implied and not explored. When they are handled, as I am sure they will be very soon, I hope that some aspects of this book will be found useful. In the book's latter stages I acknowledge an enormous debt to Neil Hertz's collection of essays, *The End of the Line*; and at the same point I try to assimilate his theory of the 'turn at the end of the line' to my more pragmatic notions of the pleonasm. I'm sure it could have been done less clumsily, but I believe it is a worthwhile connexion.

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## Scepticism, Job and the double principle

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There is a set of sceptical commonplaces announced and exemplified in Sterne's fiction which I want to begin by enumerating. They are not especially new or interesting in themselves, but they foster experiments in characterisation, narrative and aesthetics which I hope *are* interesting because they are the subject of the following book.

### Propositions and illustrations

A collection of these commonplaces, neatly summarising the assumptions of Sterne's favourite authors (especially Montaigne), is found in Hume's essay 'The Sceptic' (1741). There he maintains that all judgments about things are unstable because the value of a thing is not determined by any immutable quality belonging to it, but by the extremely varied responses it will induce in the people who encounter it. This variety is owing both to the different situations in which things may be found and to the different moods in which they will be viewed. Discourse of reason will never bring people to a consensus about things because their impressions of them (variously named sentiments, passions and tastes) are not susceptible to rational discrimination, only to the accidents, intuitions, habits and prejudices which are constantly forming and re-forming them. Hume draws two conclusions. The first is that there is never any clear relation between perceptions and things, since perceptions are neither consistent nor continuous, and since the notion of a continuous identity of things is an illusion persisting in spite of the various and interrupted views we have of them. The second is that no language will affect these perceptions which does not itself participate in the mixed cases it addresses. 'The reflections of philosophy', says Hume, 'are too subtle and distant to take place in common life, or eradicate any affection.'<sup>1</sup>

*Tristram Shandy* is littered with similar conclusions. The epigraph from Epictetus – 'It is not things, but opinions concerning them, that disturb

1 Hume, 'The Sceptic', in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (London: World's Classics, 1903), p. 175. For an authoritative commentary on the essay, as well as on Hume's scepticism generally, see Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 117–22.

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us' – introduces scene after scene showing that no thing is immune from the effects of its adjacent circumstances and the temper of its beholder. 'Need I tell you, Sir,' asks Tristram while his father is getting tangled up in his coat pockets, 'that the circumstances with which every thing in this world is begirt, give every thing in this world its size and shape;—and . . . make the thing to be, what it is—great—little—good—bad—indifferent or not indifferent, just as the case happens.'<sup>2</sup> The same scene authorises the subsequent observation that 'A man's body and his mind, with the utmost reverence to both I speak it, are exactly like a jerkin, and a jerkin's lining;—rumple the one—you rumple the other' (*TS*, 3.4.160). When Tristram's own lining is rumpled on the way to Paris, he concludes that 'REASON is, half of it, SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions' (*TS*, 7.13.494). The importance of situation in determining what is to be thought or said of an object is most neatly illustrated in Toby's attempted distinction between the crescent-shaped siegeworks called ravelins and half-moons: 'When a ravelin stands before the curtain, it is a ravelin; and when a ravelin stands before a bastion, then the ravelin is not a ravelin;—it is a half-moon' (*TS*, 2.12.112). Mood is influenced by more factors than situation, but Tristram shows how critically the equilibrium (or otherwise) of the mind and the body bears upon our judgments. He needs only to shave his chin and put on his best suit for his writing and his temper immediately to improve; whereas Walter Shandy's awkward reaching for his left-hand coat pocket forces first his body, then his feelings and sentiments, into an irritable and combative pattern.

Shandean relativity allows nothing to stand neutral or independent. An idea needs to be animated by an impression, an object by some adjacent circumstance, or a proposition by a sentiment or case, otherwise it will never be registered. It will remain like those simple notions which 'are every day swimming quietly in the middle of the thin juice of a man's understanding, without being carried backwards or forwards' (*TS*, 3.9.167). Phutatorius' oath 'Zounds!' requires, like the chestnut that occasions it, a consideration of circumstances and impressions if it is to be assigned a value or to have its interpretation corroborated. As the heat in his breeches crosses the border between pleasure and pain, Phutatorius' imagination is incapable of staying neutral; it must fasten an image to the sensation. In fact it fastens one of a reptile's fastening teeth, and the resulting exclamation makes the same demand for extra context on the imaginations of his audience. Identity as well as neutrality is ruled out of this world. Things 'not worth a button in themselves' become

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James A. Work (Odyssey Press: New York, 1940), 3.2.158, p. 158. I have decided to retain this edition, although technically superseded by the Florida edition, partly because it is more accessible to general readers and partly because I have a longstanding affection for it. Hereafter cited in brackets as *TS* followed by volume, chapter and page numbers.



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serious objects when united with others – a faded uniform, for example, joined with Toby's person becomes worth looking at (*TS*, 9.2.601). Names for which Toby wouldn't give a cherry stone are of inestimable value to his brother. There is always some accident in the arrangement or the observation of things to prevent them from being just themselves.

Tristram makes elaborate fun of propositions of identity. When his father attacks his mother's motive for wanting to look through the keyhole at Toby's courtship of Mrs Wadman, implying that it is something worse than curiosity that impels her, Tristram remarks, 'The mistake of my father, was in attacking my mother's motive, instead of the act itself: for certainly key-holes were made for other purposes; and considering the act, as an act which interfered with a true proposition, and denied a key-hole to be what it was—it became a violation of nature' (*TS*, 9.1.600). This sardonic defence of the 'quidditas' of keyholes, like the mocking tautology of his definition of nose as *nose* (*TS*, 3.31.218), serves only to emphasise the inevitability of our using things, ideas and words in ways which destroy their simplicity and identity. People who talk of the '*corregiescity* of *Corregio*', or gravely declare that 'nature is nature', are either knaves or fools (*TS*, 3.12.181; 5.10.365).

In Tristram's opinion there are certain situations especially resistant to simple ideas and univocal terms. Love is one of these, being a vortex of conflicting impressions, prescriptions and cases. It can rise as high as the galaxy and sink as low as the devil's kitchen; the identical feeling can manifest itself as tenderness in one breast and hatred in another, or even as an alternation between the two if the breast is as sensitive to new impressions as Tristram's (*TS*, 8.11.550; 8.4.542). Out of this confusion, where there are 'half a dozen words for one thing', he refuses to draw even a mock definition. Instead he composes his contradictory alphabet of love, together with a number of elaborate metaphors, usually with a military vehicle in deference to Toby's transformation from soldier into lover. In comparing an eye to a cannon, he founds the resemblance on the fact that 'it is not so much the eye or the cannon, in themselves, as it is the carriage of the eye—and the carriage of the cannon, by which both the one and the other are enabled to do so much execution' (*TS*, 8.25.577). The conceit is picked up by Trim when telling Toby how much women love jokes, and how the only way to find out what sort suits which woman is to experiment 'as we do with our artillery in the field, by raising or letting down their breeches, till we hit the mark' (*TS*, 9.8.609). Oblivious to the innuendo, Toby replies, 'I like the comparison better than the thing itself.' 'The thing itself' is of course an unconscious addition to the numerous equivocations on the 'hirsute and gashly' focus of all amorous *argumenta ad rem* (*TS*, 8.11.550; 1.21.71); but Toby's statement of preference is quite a complex addition to them. At a philosophical level it rehearses the basic sceptical proposition that 'objects have absolutely no worth or value in themselves', that our verdicts upon them embrace 'not the object simply as



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it is in itself . . . but all the circumstances that attend it' (Hume, 'The Sceptic', pp. 169, 174). At the level of rhetoric it establishes the superiority of a figure over a literalism and a joke over a statement of fact. In sexual terms it is both a recommendation and an example of equivocation, faithful to Walter's written advice to his brother to 'leave as many things as thou canst quite undetermined' (*TS*, 8.34.592).

These preferences are highly esteemed by Tristram. He detests the pursuit of the thing itself, the object simply as it is in itself, on all the same grounds: philosophically, because arguments about essence and substance have 'perpetuated so much gall and ink-shed,—that a good natured man cannot read the accounts of them without tears in his eyes' (*TS*, 2.2.87); rhetorically, because he has a horror of falling into 'a cold unmetaphorical vein of infamous writing . . . like a Dutch commentator' (*TS*, 9.13.616); sexually, because concupiscence results in false abstractions, where noses, groins or a set of whiskers, in becoming the unambiguous signs of the desired thing, shed the constitutive, richly indistinct surplus of a situation, which is then viewed as insignificant rubbish – empty bottles, tripes, trunk-hose and pantofles (*TS*, 9.22.626).

Nature is the most amiable of the personifications in *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, a being 'almost as merry as she is wise'.<sup>3</sup> She is the source of the endless variety which, says Hume, our minds should try to equal ('The Sceptic', p. 161) and of which love, in Tristram's opinion, is the most dramatically multifarious example. She guides her followers to a spontaneous relish for the instability and uncertainty of experience. 'Whatever is my situation,' cries Yorick in an apostrophe to Nature, 'let me feel the movements which rise out of it' (*ASJ*, p. 237). In tracing the movements arising from implicit confidence in her government, Tristram exemplifies their equivocality in a telling image:

She dear Goddess, by an instantaneous impulse, in all *provoking cases*, determines us to a sally of this or that member—or else thrusts us into this or or that place, or posture of body, we know not why—But mark, madam, we live amongst riddles and mysteries—the most obvious things, which come in our way, have dark sides, which the quickest sight cannot penetrate into; and even the clearest and most exalted understandings amongst us find ourselves puzzled and at a loss in almost every cranny of nature's works; so that this, like a thousand other things, falls out for us in a way, which tho' we cannot reason upon it,—yet we find the good of it. (*TS*, 4.7.293)

As in Toby's accidental innuendo, 'obvious things' are punned to the dark edge of indecency to emphasise how hopelessly reason and analytic discourse are contaminated by sense and impulse. And just as his uncle's spontaneous

3 Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, ed. Gardner D. Stout (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 174. Hereafter cited as *ASJ*.

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pun illustrates the preferences he is trying to state, so Tristram's rhetoric is agreeable to his sentiments, inasmuch as he reproduces figuratively in the form of equivokes on the dark and crannied sides of 'things', the obscurities he mentions and values.

Whenever Tristram adopts or recommends a sceptical position, he will be found playing between extremes. Here, for example, the extremes of divinityship and dark crannies are analogous to the starry heights and 'gashly' depths which bounded his feelings about love. The same impulse to veer between ideal and carnal levels is evident in his description of what it is like to wrestle with a dilemma, where the mind is torn between two equally attractive but opposite possibilities: 'It is not to be told in what a degree such a wayward kind of friction works upon the more gross and solid parts, wasting the fat and impairing the strength of a man every time as it goes backwards and forwards' (*TS*, 4.31.336). The shilly-shallies of doubt are run into a lewd analogy with the rhythms of copulation, so that alternating notions and motions are equally to be derived from an act of indecent exposure Tristram calls the 'unbuttoning' of a vexation. His analysis of the sentimental element in the tender conference enjoyed by Julia and Diego after their reunion turns on two extreme hypotheses. The first is that two lovers might glance at the ceiling and knock their chins together; the other that they might stare at one another's laps and bang their foreheads. He concludes that the sentimental ingredient, which makes his own heart vibrate to Slawkenbergius' strangely suggestive phrase, 'lambent pupilability of slow, low, dry chat', is sustained by keeping eye-beams and feelings on the horizontal, much as his own are during his dance with Nanette at the end of the seventh volume, where his glance comprehends the 'heaven' of an ideal relationship and the 'lap of content' represented by the slit in her petticoat, but is seduced by neither (*TS*, 4.1.273; 7.43.538).

This sentimental equilibrium is not achieved by rejecting sexuality and intellectuality, but by encouraging their cooperation in the production of associated ideas and equivocal expressions. Tristram takes Swift's delight in such materialised abstractions, as 'depression' and 'gravitation'; more so when the material element is sexual, as in 'ejaculation' and 'manual effervescencies'. He regards this sort of play as not merely expressive of the psychophysiological mixtures in which we all are obliged to function, but also as an ethical obstacle put in the way of the unequivocal pursuit of 'the thing itself', whether occasioned by sexual or intellectual intemperance. The puns he makes on this phrase, 'the thing itself', blur the object of lust with the formula of identity so that the one extreme of undistracted desire mocks the other. Tristram's word-play gets brighter the further apart the extremes he negotiates: light and darkness, digression and progression, fasting and feasting, tragedy and comedy, tears and laughter. He is constantly sensitising himself and his reader to the mutuality of these opposites, not knowing, as he says, how near he may be 'under the necessity of placing them to each other' (*TS*, 7.19.502).