

Chapter I

Subjectivity revealed through textual fields of reference

1 Does *Tristram Shandy* have a beginning?

The question itself implies that the time-honoured concept of a story as having a beginning, a middle and an end cannot be regarded as the fixed criterion of narration, for *Tristram Shandy* has become a landmark of narrative literature despite its flagrant breach of this convention. Generally the violation of such norms serves to bring out whatever has been concealed by customary expectations. If a story is supposed to have a beginning, a middle and an end, it is for the purpose of exemplifying the point it intends to make. A story that has difficulty with its own beginnings need not be any the less exemplary, but the clear implication is that its exemplarity will be of a different nature: instead of serving to elucidate a specific social, moral or political purpose, for instance, the story may now concern itself with uncovering the presuppositions underlying a beginning.

For the most part novelists of the early eighteenth century paid little attention to such problems. They tended to latch straight on to the traditional formula, either beginning their story *ab ovo* or immediately going *in medias res*, and one can even find variations of the fairy-tale 'once upon a time', as for example at the start of Fielding's *Tom Jones*: 'In that part of the western division of this kingdom which is commonly called Somersetshire, there lately lived, and perhaps lives still, a gentleman whose name was Allworthy' (Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* I, p. 3).

The advantage of such a conventional starting-point was that it required no explanation, and indeed a drawn-out consideration of how to begin might have detracted from the aim of telling the exemplary story of the hero. In order to perform their deeds, the heroes first had to come into the world, and so their birth was something that could be taken for granted.

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In *Tristram Shandy*, however, nothing can be taken for granted. The narrator does not in any way regard his birth as a beginning; indeed it seems to him almost like a doom-laden end: “‘*My Tristram’s misfortunes*”, says Uncle Toby, “‘*began nine months before ever he came into the world*” (I, 3, 11), and the italics place full emphasis upon this announcement.

The beginning, then, is already a result, for the birth was preceded by the conception, and this, according to Tristram, raises the question of whether his father and mother

duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing; – that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind; – and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost. (I, 1, 9)

But what, at this decisive moment, actually preoccupied the father and mother was their own particular association of ideas. Marital duties were normally preceded by the winding of the clock, and at the crucial moment Mother Shandy counters him with a ‘silly question’.

If, as Paul Valéry suggests, the novel’s point of departure contains its poetics in a nutshell (cf. Norbert Miller, ‘Die Rollen des Erzählers’, p. 40), what does such a beginning reveal? The answer must be: multilayered problematisation of how to start.

First, the inception may be read as a parody, which would point to a historical reference. For the hero of the eighteenth-century novel, birth is a beginning without question; what matters is his *history*, frequently stressed in the actual titles of the narratives. *History* had specific connotations: it illustrated the testing of norms and ideals by subjecting them to the vicissitudes of time, and even if the Christian origins of such tests tended to fade into the background, this was the pattern that underlay the biographical form of the novel, as Lukács has called it (see *Die Theorie des Romans*, pp. 68–82). It is not by chance that very early on Tristram alludes to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (I, 4, 12), for although he has no desire to compete with it, he would like an equally wide reading public for his own narrative. While the path followed so tentatively by Bunyan’s pilgrim leads towards the hoped-for certitude of salvation, *history* focuses on the empirical world in order to validate the norms represented by the hero. If *history* is meant

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to ratify these values, it is still subservient to an overriding purpose, which, in turn, finds its endorsement only through the successful mastery of life's conflicts.

Through this fusion of overall purposes with the reality of experience, the eighteenth-century hero became a carrier of meaning, and his birth – if it was mentioned at all – was no more than the natural beginning of what was to be accomplished by the end. Tristram is no such messenger, and so he does not write a *history* but a *Life*, with no aspirations towards self-perfection, but simply in the sense defined by Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* as a 'Narrative of a Life past'. This kind of *Life* is in direct contrast to the *history*, for instead of binding all events together in an ultimate meaning, it expands each single incident out into its prehistory, showing that the character of events is such that they need not necessarily have taken the course that they did. While the *history* is drawn together by the meaning of its end, the *Life* explodes into the imponderable. The connections between natural and historical processes thus undergo a remarkable inversion: in the *history* type of novel, the hero's birth is the natural precondition for the unfolding of his story; for Tristram, the birth stands at the end of an infinitely expanding range of prehistories. Underlying the *history* is a teleological ordering of its purpose, whereas Tristram's pre-birth life stories are all marked by the workings of chance.

If, however, Tristram's *Life* were written only as a counter to the success story contained in the *history*, then the latent parody would now have nothing but historical interest. But a parody that can outlast the context of its genesis must be more than a mere inversion of an inherited schema.

Since the beginning itself turns out to be a result, with Tristram's misfortunes starting nine months before his birth, it may be said that for the most part the hero can hardly be held responsible for what happens to him. Consequently he is no longer a suitable carrier of meaning in the service of an overall purpose, and so in comparison to his fellow eighteenth-century heroes, Tristram is without a function. Instead of demonstrating something, he himself becomes the object of scrutiny, thus causing a shift in the narrative tradition by opening up hitherto unexplored realms: the hero, having lost his various traditional functions, is now set free to become a subject in his own right; and being thrown back upon himself, as it were, he begins to discover himself in all his difficult complexity.

In the circumstances, it is only logical that the very first

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sentence of Sterne's novel should allude to the humours as the natural explanation of man's nature. If the hero becomes a self to be focused on, then recourse to his physiological basis is the least determinate approach to defining what the self might be. Whatever it is, it certainly has a body made up of humours. Furthermore, the theory of the humours was one with which eighteenth-century readers were quite familiar, so that whatever may have been its evaluation in *Tristram Shandy*, it was a way of making the new subject-matter of the self accessible to the contemporary public.

Straightaway, however, the double function of this concept finds itself in trouble. The first sentence of the novel reels off a hypotactic string of conditions to be considered when the humours are being constituted, and the following chapter (I, 2, 10f.) then proceeds to discuss the engendering of the homunculus, who may be subject to a thousand weaknesses if the mixture of his fluids should be wrong. Just as the formula for an artificial being remains inaccessible to the philosophers, so too do Tristram's parents remain unaware of what they are starting.

By showing how inexplicable are the forces that govern the physiological interplay of the humours, Sterne overturns the whole structure of contemporary anthropology: instead of offering a natural explanation of the self, it now makes the self inaccessible. Thus the theory of the humours achieves two things: it throws the self into the foreground by focusing upon its nature; and it nullifies definition of the self by showing the impenetrability of that nature.

The theory of the humours is marred both for Tristram and the homunculus by an all-important lacuna – namely, how they are combined. What, then, could be more natural than to refer to a philosophy which had pondered this very problem and in so doing heralded the age of Enlightenment? From the very beginning *Tristram Shandy* comes to grips with the ideas of John Locke, which indeed permeate the whole novel, and which we shall be discussing in some detail. Mother Shandy's connection of her marital duties with the winding of the clock is an early illustration of Locke's association of ideas; here, as elsewhere, the idiosyncrasy is infuriating for the partner, but it is also responsible for the manner in which Tristram's body fluids are mixed. It is, therefore, scarcely surprising that he regards such a mechanism as being the cause of his misfortunes.

Against the background of Locke's philosophy, the self

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seems almost the embodiment of chance, and so it becomes very doubtful whether the desired interplay between the humours can be brought under control. In seeking the conditions of his beginnings, Tristram is forced to recognise the impossibility of ever finding them. And yet, with the theory of the humours and the association of ideas he has invoked the broadest possible range of both anthropological and epistemological modes of comprehension, only to realise that the best they can offer him is awareness of the incomprehensibility of his origin.

The opening of the novel can, however, also point in another direction. The theory of the humours and the association of ideas are both overarching frameworks, whose evident inadequacy spotlights something new to be revealed to the reader – namely, the self referring to itself. As itself it can only be manifested through a striking double perspective: viewing prevailing frames of reference, it devalues them; and viewed *from* these frames of reference, it functions as their negation. By doing both simultaneously, it resists any cognitive definition and so distances itself from the expected function of the characters in the eighteenth-century novel. Thus it cannot be a ‘flat character’, let alone an allegorical one, and even if their predictable reactions make Walter and Toby seem like ‘flat characters’ (see Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, pp. 65–79), the resemblance is only structural, as they nullify the concomitant function by standing for something impenetrable.

The circumstantial opening of the novel highlights its basic procedural mode. All facts presented at the outset appear to relate to a beginning without, however, constituting one, since what is said points back to a conditionality which ceaselessly dwindles into unfathomableness. This is certainly not in line with the beginning as observed in the eighteenth-century novel. Therefore Tristram assures us in various passages throughout the narrative that these either are or could be a beginning. What emerges from such references is not so much *the* beginning, but rather the actual nature of beginnings. Soon after this factual opening, he announces:

. . . right glad I am that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on tracing everything in it, as Horace says, *ab Ovo*. Horace, I know, does not recommend this fashion altogether: But that gentleman is speaking only of an epic poem or a tragedy – (I forget which) . . . for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived.

(I, 4, 12)

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After Tristram has begun, he comments on his own beginning, and if he is referring here to common ground between himself and his reader, it is only in order to undermine that common ground and thus bring out the otherness of his own approach. He takes *ab ovo* in its quite literal sense, thereby exposing the artificiality of the conventional beginnings of novels, which under pretext of being a start are in fact no more than postulates laid down to ratify the end. Indeed the 'truthfulness' of this 'history of myself' is derived from the narrator's personal set of rules, since these can only be understood retrospectively as a pattern of interconnected ramifications, whereas prospectively they are always open and, therefore, unpredictable. Hindsight confirms the veracity by exposing the unpredictability of connections that have now become clear. It follows, then, that this story can only be written, as it were, backwards, since the aim is to bring light into the dense thicket of diversifications. History can, of course, only be written from the standpoint of an end, but is not birth itself an end, and indeed is not conception the end of that which preceded it and of that which at the time was unforeseeable? Where does one begin the beginning? Sterne's narrator is totally conscious of this problem, and so all his beginnings are riddled with reservations and must, therefore, remain abortive.

Even when the narrative is nearing its end, the talk is once again of a beginning. Chapter 40 of Book 6 opens with the remark:

I am now beginning to get fairly into my work; and by the help of a vegetable diet, with a few of the cold seeds, I make no doubt but I shall be able to go on with my uncle Toby's story, and my own, in a tolerable straight line. (VI, 40, 384f.)

Now if this effort to go in a straight line is to be a genuine beginning, then such a beginning will run directly counter to the method Tristram has practised so far. For linear narration is precisely what Tristram has hitherto regarded as a 'minus function', i.e. the deliberate omission of an expected technique (for the term see J. Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte*, pp. 144f., 207 and 267), as can be seen from the lines with which he depicts the wanderings of his previous volumes. One of the main reasons why he deliberately avoids linearity is that it can reveal nothing about the beginning but a great deal about the end, and the beginning that Tristram is searching for should not

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be determined by being the beginning of an end. Straight lines adumbrate teleology, and indeed Tristram points to a few variations on the teleological theme:

This *right line*, – the pathway for Christians to walk in! Say divines – – The emblem of moral rectitude! says *Cicero* – – The *best line*! say cabbage planters – is the shortest line, says Archimedes, which can be drawn from one given point to another. (VI, 40, 386)

If straight lines prefigure journeys to commonplace goals, what, then, might be the goal of Tristram's history? The answer is yet another question, which Tristram puts to his reader at the end of the chapter:

Pray can you tell me, – that is, without anger, before I write my chapter upon straight lines – by what mistake – who told them so – or how it has come to pass, that you men of wit and genius have all along confounded this line with the line of GRAVITATION? (VI, 40, 386)

For men of wit and genius all events gravitate towards an end, which signals 'perfection' even when it is just a matter of arranging cabbages in the right order, and Tristram's history has already reminded readers of the literal meaning of 'GRAVITATION': it is a continual fall, whether it be the sash-window falling upon his genitals, or the hot chestnut falling down 'into that aperture of Phutatorius's breeches' (IV, 22, 261), or the splintering stone falling on Toby's groin. If the illustrious intellects mistake this fall for the straight line – straightness indeed being a fundamental feature of the free fall – then it follows that their linear teleology will not gravitate towards the fulfilment of a goal, but will itself constitute a free fall whose consequences and implications will be unpredictable.

In his life, Tristram has plenty of experience of the straight-lined free fall, whose description does not strike him altogether as a bad idea for getting his story going. However, the gravitation he describes does not suggest a teleological movement, but the linearity of a free fall, the very nature of which excludes the certainty of where it may end. Therefore, what the gravitational line will hit is as uncertain as the actual beginning that Tristram is trying to catch hold of. This is why his attempts at last to find a straight line may just as well constitute a beginning for him. But if his aim is to find a straight line, then the lines themselves *are* the purpose, and so cannot *have* a

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purpose. The side effect of this – which is no doubt deliberate on Sterne's part – is that the linear technique of narration as practised in the eighteenth century is shown up in all its interest-governed conditionality.

Just as the 'straight line' discussion centres on conventional narrative expectations, so too does another of Tristram's attempts to get started. After the death of his brother Bobby, Tristram becomes

heir apparent to the Shandy family – and it is from this point properly that the story of my LIFE and my OPINIONS sets out; with all my hurry and precipitation I have but been clearing the ground to raise the building – and such a building do I foresee it will turn out, as never was planned, and as never was executed, since Adam. In less than five minutes I shall have thrown my pen into the fire, and the little drop of thick ink which is left remaining at the bottom of my inkhorn after it – I have but half a score of things to do in the time – I have a thing to name – a thing to lament – a thing to hope – a thing to promise, and a thing to threaten – I have a thing to suppose – a thing to declare – a thing to conceal – a thing to choose, and a thing to pray for.

(IV, 32, 273f.)

So far his search for the beginning has had birth as its starting-point, but now it is another man's death that appears to be the beginning of Tristram's story; and just as birth staggered its way back into preconditional ramifications, now death explodes his story into a multiplicity of possibilities, the simultaneous realisation of which transforms the temporal sequence of his story into a space-like instantaneity – whose singularity has never before been attempted in human history. This could imply that Sterne, as the architect of the transformation, is vying with the Creator – a commonplace idea which was on the rise in the eighteenth century.

As the heir apparent, Tristram slips into the role of a hero who, according to eighteenth-century narrative conventions, was meant to represent norms and values to be tested by multifarious events and finally ratified through the continuity of his story. And indeed Sterne does not dispute this representative role; on the contrary, the renewed beginning of Tristram's story would seem to stress this expectation. Tristram is now the representative of the house of Shandy. But what characterises this house is not the norms and values of the eighteenth-century world picture; reigning in this house is the singularity of the self, whose eccentric history must run counter

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to all existing guidelines as none of them is able to capture it.

There are several more examples of different beginnings, but none of them go any further towards solving the basic problem of making a start. Worth mentioning is the foreword, which stands not at the beginning but in the middle of the book. Another point to note is the fact that the first book ends twenty-three years before *Tristram's* birth, and the last five years before, the latter actually concluding with a remark made by Yorick, who had already died in the first book. Thus, the end often seems like a beginning, and the beginning often marks an end.

What, then, can be the purpose of all these beginnings? We have already noted the difference between *Tristram Shandy* and other eighteenth-century novels, which began either *ab ovo* or rushed *in medias res*, in order to endow with verisimilitude what Congreve called 'an Unity of Contrivance' (see *The Complete Works* I, p. 112) as the hallmark of narrative. In comparison, the factual opening of *Tristram Shandy* seems artificial, although it sets out to investigate a natural event. What Sterne does is to use an evident 'Contrivance' in order to expose as artificial the suppositions behind the apparent naturalness of the conventional beginnings of novels. The unmasking of that strategy constitutes a purpose in itself; yet as Sterne must also find a beginning, his book is subject to problems that are comparable to those whose solutions he is seeking to undermine. The opening of *Tristram Shandy* could, therefore, not confine itself to being just a new variation on how to start. Instead, as only one of several beginnings, it highlights the fact that all beginnings are geared to a presupposed outcome, which they are meant to lead up to. A multiplicity of beginnings throws this hidden interconnection into relief, thus exposing the beginning as a retroactive patterning in accordance with the result intended.

The fact that *Tristram's* life story has no beginning, and that beginnings defy exploration, does not mean that the matter is simply allowed to rest. On the contrary, the more the beginning resists capture, the greater is the effort to overcome its recalcitrance. Thus, the narrator keeps approaching *Tristram's* life from different directions in the hope of pinning down its starting-point. But Sterne has also endowed the narrator with insight into the fact that none of his possible beginnings can ever be equated with *the* beginning, and so each individual

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attempt is counteracted by its consequences which, in turn, undermine its aspirations to be *the* solution. This gives rise to an ambivalence, which is in itself extremely revealing. The very fact that beginnings elude one's grasp triggers the drive to capture them, the cost, however, being that a state of validity is withheld from the solution provided. Therefore, all these solutions are nothing but images of how beginnings can be pictured.

This development is already hinted at in the title of the novel. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, gentleman* suggests that these will be opinions inspired by and passed upon life. But according to Dr Johnson, opinion is '*Perswasion* of the mind, without proof and certain knowledge', and he quotes Ben Jonson in support of this definition: '*Opinion* is a light, vain, crude and imperfect thing, settled in the imagination, but never arriving at the understanding, there to obtain the tincture of reason' (Johnson, *Dictionary*). This contemporary definition of the word is underlined by the motto on the title page of *Tristram Shandy*, which stems from Epictetus and reads: 'It is not actions, but opinions concerning actions, which disturb men.'

The opinions to be expressed on life are ideas which can never cover what they are meant to embrace. In this way the implied author shades into the narrator, who thus speaks with two voices – not because he describes his life and expresses views on it, but because all his utterances are permeated with the knowledge that life exceeds its depiction and can, as it were, only be theatrically staged. The beginning is one example of this, and the characters are another.

Sterne has imbued his novel with consciousness that narration is the conceivability of the otherwise elusive, and at the same time he shows clearly that this insight leads not to resignation, but to a process of stimulating the reader's imagination. What has constantly been referred to as self-reflexivity in Sterne has its roots in his awareness of the ineradicable difference between the given object and its representation. This is why narrative for him is a matter of staging and not of mimesis. This is all the more evident as he tells of that which cannot be imitated – first, the beginning, and then the subjectivity of the self. Nevertheless, he also shows that those areas of life which are impenetrable to cognition must be narrated, because they can only become accessible to us as staged ideas.