

# Hilarion's Asse



Hilarion's Asse:  
Laurence Sterne and Humour

Edited by

Anne Bandry-Scubbi and Peter de Voogd

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Anne Dromart.



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# PREFACE

SUZY HALIMI

PROFESSOR EMERITUS, SORBONNE NOUVELLE -PARIS 3,  
FORMER CHAIR (2005-2011) OF SOCIÉTÉ D'ÉTUDES  
ANGLO-AMÉRICAINES DES XVII<sup>E</sup> ET XVIII<sup>E</sup> SIÈCLES

Our Society of Anglo-American Studies for the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries (SEAA XVII-XVIII) has existed for some forty years; we celebrated its anniversary a few years ago. Time had come to brush up its statutes and to revise and expand its publishing activity. Our governing board has accordingly devised and implemented a new policy for the diffusion of knowledge. We already had a Bulletin which was growing in importance and volume. We considered it would be more relevant to present it henceforth as a Review, with an international editorial board, an annual theme and a section of “Varia” welcoming contributions from specialists of other disciplines such as history, philosophy, art. *RSEAA* is published as an annual volume. Issues can be consulted online after two years ([www.1718.fr](http://www.1718.fr)).

Round that central pillar, new developments were added progressively. Special issues of our Review are now devoted to the publications of various research centres which wish to have a better visibility under cover of our national society. At the same time, a seminar for young researchers was created in partnership with the French Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Mainly for PhD students, it is hosted each year by a different university in France, with a pluridisciplinary approach in collaboration with colleagues of the same institution but of different specialities. The best contributions are published online on our website or on the website of the host university.

Last, but not least, at the other end of the spectrum, at the top of the pyramid, so to speak, a new collection is developing, for eminent researchers. Topical volumes are entrusted to guest editors round a special subject – an historical event, the anniversary of some important author, artist, etc. – with one member of the *Société* and a foreign colleague inviting contributions from the best specialists on the subject. This new collection will be taken in charge by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, according to an agreement

passed between them and our Society. The current volume on Laurence Sterne, whose tercentenary anniversary will be celebrated in 2013, inaugurates the new collection. It paves the way for a new trend in our publishing policy, with our best wishes for full success and a long and fruitful collaboration with C-S-P.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Unless otherwise indicated, references to Sterne's works are cited parenthetically in the text, using the following abbreviation list:

- TS*      *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne. Vols. 1-2, *The Text*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New. Vol. 3, *The Notes*, by Melvyn New, Richard A. Davies and W.G. Day (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978, 1984). References to the text of *Tristram Shandy* are to original volume and chapter, followed by page number in the Florida Edition; thus 'TS, 2. 2, 98' means: volume 2, chapter 2, Florida Edition p. 98.
- ASJ*      *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy and Continuation of the Bramine's Journal. The Text and Notes*. The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne. Vol. 6. Eds. Melvyn New and W.G. Day (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).
- Letters*      *The Letters, Part 1: 1739-1764; Part 2: 1765-1768*. The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne. Vols. 7 and 8. Eds. Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### Figure 1

*La Fleur in the Counts Kitchen.* After Newton, *Dance in the Kitchen at Amiens.* Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, with Twelve Illustrative Prints, Designed and Etched by Richard Newton, London: Holland, 1797. BM Alexander 320.

### Figure 2

La Fleur. Amiens. William Harding, print study, 1787. BM Bynion1.

### Figure 3

*Maria entering Moulines.* Richard Newton, London: Holland, 1797. Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, with Twelve Illustrative Prints, Designed and Etched by Richard Newton. © Laurence Sterne Trust. Used with permission.

### Figure 4

Braying Jackasses. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman.* London: MacDonald, 1949, p.393. Illustration Brian Robb. Private collection.



## INTRODUCTION

ANNE BANDRY-SCUBBI  
AND PETER DE VOOGD

Saint Hilarion is the rather obscure hermit called upon by Walter in volume 8 of *Tristram Shandy* as the man “who, in speaking of his abstinence, his watchings, flagellations, and other instrumental parts of his religion—would say—tho’ with more facetiousness than became an hermit—‘That they were the means he used, to make his *ass* (meaning his body) leave off kicking” (*TS* 8.31, 715).<sup>1</sup> Uncle Toby is not amused and Hilarion’s life was not hilarious – at least in a hagiographic reading. Walter’s paronomastic skidding provides a short-cut to Sterne’s humour: conflating sexuality and textuality, corporeality and spirituality, animality and humanity, sensuality and sensibility, seriousness and facetiousness, story, text and metatext. Walter Shandy uses “Hilarion’s metaphor” to provoke his literal brother and put meaning as Toby would have it “in jeopardy” (2.2, 101). If definitions can only be tautological (“—For by the word Nose [...] —I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less”) because polysemy prevails (“—Here are two senses, cried Eugenius [...] And here are two roads, replied I, turning short upon him,—a dirty and a clean one”; *TS* 3.31, 258), then the use of words can only be, like Walter’s, “perverse” (8.31, 715). The pleasure arising from such Lockean imperfection of language triggers the change from Hilarion’s ass to Tristram’s hobby-horse, “the sporting little filly-folly which carries you out for the present hour [...] an *any thing*, which a man makes a shift to get a stride on, to canter it away from the cares and solitudes of life” (*Ibid.*). Sterne incites the reader to accept Tristram’s invitation to “jogg on” and either laugh with him or at him (1.6, 10) and nine European scholars have accepted our invitation to do just that.

Since *The Winged Skull* celebrated the bicentenary of Sterne’s death, much critical writing has been published, including the scholarly edition of

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<sup>1</sup> Sterne found Hilarion in Burton, who found it in St. Jerome (Florida Notes to *TS* 522, from Work 583, from Ferriar 1, 117).

the *Works* by Florida UP, now nearly finished, and *The Shandean*, with twenty-three yearly volumes so far. Although the humour of Sterne's fictions is often acknowledged, it has become more of a background issue than a focus in its own right – indeed, it is not easy to find scholarly articles on Laurence Sterne which suggest that their authors laughed as they wrote. May Sterne's tercentenary make it clear that reading Sterne is fun.

In “as many chapters as [books]” (4.10) the present volume celebrates the tercentenary of Sterne's birth by revisiting the way Shandeism “makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round” (4.32) from an early twenty-first century perspective. Thomas Keymer's *Sterne, the Moderns and the Novel* launched such an approach and reconciled the two strands of Sterne criticism: “Neither Renaissance satire nor postmodern metafiction, [*Tristram Shandy*] draws on one to herald the other, in ways enabled and informed by [its] contemporaneous literary hinterland” (Keymer 2002, 12).<sup>2</sup>

The first two chapters analyse the general processes at work in Sterne's humour. By considering *Tristram Shandy* as a “Comedy of Errors” Madeleine Descargues-Grant takes issue with James Wood's 2004 *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* to foreground the principle of error Sterne systematically relies on. This, she argues, produces comedy rather than tragedy or satire because of the “safety net” provided by the Christian religion. Anne Dromart applied Sterne's offer to Pitt rather too literally, writing “Make them like unto a wheel: Motion and Humour in *Tristram Shandy*” while fighting against an illness which got the better of her before she could see the publication of the present volume. Her use of recent theories which relate humour to split reference casts light on the way Tristram's lively unreliability continually creates gaps which make the reader aware of the necessity of constant movement to keep death at bay.

The focus then shifts to some of the modes which animate Sterne's fictions. In “A Book that Excites Laughter: The Physiology of Laughter in *Tristram Shandy*” Alexis Tadié explores the consequences of the shandean definition of humour by putting laughter in a diachronic perspective, from Aristotle to Beattie, from cruelty to sentimentalism. “A ‘new order of beings and things’: Caricature in Sterne's Fictional Worlds” also considers changing views and Sterne's role in their evolution, for which M.C. Newbould takes into account both Tristram and Yorick, “the touring caricaturist”. Rather than relating Sterne's first novel to a changing perception, Marc Martinez positions it as regards a particular mode:

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne C. Booth anticipated this with the slightly wider view that “If Sterne is the fountainhead of all modern literature, is he not also the culminating receptacle of all previous developments?” (Booth, 285).



“Asses, Artichokes and Macaroons: the Joco-Serious Humour of *Tristram Shandy*” reads the encounter with the ass of Lyons in volume 7 as a nodal point and looks at the ways in which the self-consciousness of the comic writer reverberates throughout the text.

The next four chapters examine in detail some of Sterne’s ploys. Brigitte Friant-Kessler enlarges Tristram’s stable to “Sterne’s Comic Menagerie”, drawing a parallel with fables heightened by the visual rhetoric of Sternean illustrations. In “Into what a delicious riot of things am I rushing?": Material Things and Humour in *Tristram Shandy*” Paul Goring deals with the ways in which dysfunctioning commodities turn the Shandy world into a tragi-comic depiction of humanity. The last two chapters address the humorous potential of the dynamics at work in shandean writing. W.G. Day’s “*Tactus interruptus* as Sternean Trope” highlights the subjectivity of the comic by establishing a continuity between rhetorical interruption and the breaking off of physical contact over Sterne’s eleven volumes of fiction, while Amélie Junqua’s “Surfeit of Words, Surviving Lists in *Tristram Shandy*” responds to the challenge of reading Sterne’s book by endowing enumerations with an energy of their own, both iterative and disruptive.

This volume offers an invitation to view nine different facets of humour, a kaleidoscope which enables readers to recombine at will the genial, the bawdy, the sentimental, the ludicrous, the hobby-horsical, the philosophical, the irreverent, the incongruous and the facetious, sending the text spiralling out of the page into the infinite of the mind.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *TRISTRAM SHANDY AS COMEDY OF ERRORS*

#### MADELEINE DESCARGUES-GRANT

As a way out of (or into?) the labyrinth of critical interpretations of and attitudes to Sterne's humour in *Tristram Shandy*, I would like to take issue with some aspects of James Wood's recent analysis of "laughter and the novel" in *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*. In this stimulating contribution to a much-visited topic, Wood argues that in "the modern novel", by which he refers essentially to the fictional explorations of the twentieth and the late nineteenth centuries, "the novelistic idea that we have bottomless interiors which may only be partially disclosed to us *must* create a new form of comedy" (Wood, 8),<sup>1</sup> a form of comedy more akin to humour than to mockery – and as such, more generous and inclusive.

Wood seems to imply that we owe the revelation of our "bottomlessness" to the novel, as it reached its apogee in the last century or so,<sup>2</sup> but he is in fact looking more searchingly into his rear-view mirror, ascribing the paternity of the stream of consciousness (a well-known manifestation of "bottomlessness") to the dramatic soliloquy, even before the Shakespearean

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<sup>1</sup> Fiction, and the novel in particular, is here taken to have a heuristic value: that of modelling the post-Freudian self, which in turn influences the forms of comedy that fiction can generate. But before the Freudian conceptual apparatus came into use, the elusiveness of the self was acknowledged by Locke, and even more so by Hume and Sterne. "Epistemologically, then", Christina Lupton has proposed, "Sterne's approach to writing models the possibility of an object constituted through a familiarity with its own failure to be known" (Lupton 2003, 112).

<sup>2</sup> We know that Virginia Woolf said "[o]n or about December 1910, human character changed"; we know that James Joyce did his best to plot the change(s) in *Ulysses*, 1922. "I am not saying", Woolf goes on to elaborate, "that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910" (Woolf, 4).

paradigm, suggesting that “if we in turn look at the origins of the soliloquy, [they] lie in prayer” (18). So he is in fact speaking of our dependence on literary vehicles in general (if one may include praying in the category, in so far as it is formulated through words) to come to terms with our interior selves. And he wishes to pay tribute to one literary genre in particular, the novel, for its overarching contribution to the “representation of consciousness through fiction”, this being “literature’s special burden” (17), as he calls it. Nobody could take exception to this.

Wood’s working division is, classically enough, “between the old and the new, the religious and the secular” (11), i.e. between “religious comedy”, as “punishment for those who deserve it”, and “secular comedy”, as “forgiveness for those who don’t” (6). Religious comedy is, very logically, under the aegis of Momus, “the patron saint of satirists” (4), since God, before whom we are potentially transparent, laughs at, but never with, on the rare occasions when He laughs at all. By contrast, secular comedy is “based on the management of our incomprehension rather than on the victory of our complete knowledge” (8) and aims at generating “sympathetic emotion” (9).

And just as Pavlov’s dog salivated at a given signal (and was doggishly disappointed), so did I on reading the phrase “sympathetic emotion” expect to see Sterne’s name turn up on the page. But not at all; the dog had got it wrong again. For Wood, Sterne finds himself within the bounds of “religious comedy”, even though he shares with Erasmus and Cervantes the capacity to offer “junctions, wherein one sees mixtures of the old and new comedy, the pre-novelistic and novelistic” (11). Of course Wood does not fail to note that “Sterne’s comic world sometimes breathes a very modern forgiveness, and there are moments of mingled tears and laughter which powerfully suggest a new kind of comedy” (12). Yet on the whole, those among Sterneans who insist on classifying *Tristram Shandy* as a satire, in terms of genre,<sup>3</sup> would be pleased with this critic’s statement that “Sterne’s characters are not fully realised creatures with interior lives—they are not quite novelistic, indeed at times they seem to belong to a long, banging satirical poem” (11-12).

In response to Wood, then: first I would contend that Sterne’s (understanding of) religion is precisely what makes him “modern”, in the

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<sup>3</sup> See Keymer (2002, 5) for a full discussion of D. W. Jefferson and, more recently, Donald Wehrs and Melvyn New’s readings of Sterne in the tradition of learned wit, as opposed to modernist and post-modern interpretations of *Tristram Shandy*.

sense in which Wood applies the word to the novel throughout his argument.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, I would also contend that Sterne's Shakespearean heritage, which I take to be central in the composition of his religious self, is underestimated by Wood, who, interestingly, sees in Shakespeare "the essential progenitor of the English novel" (15).<sup>5</sup>

But thirdly, I want to seize on the notion of "incomprehension" to lead me into my subject: the comedy of errors in Sterne's "Shakespearean" novel.

Because, beginning with the handling of characters, delineated or not, and plot, Sterne's abandonment of his fictional creatures to the principle of error seems intrinsic to the creative impulse. The "silly question" (*TS* 1.1, 2) presiding over the conception of Tristram, the leakage in information affecting his name, the incapacity of the characters to define the simplest words, such as "bridge" (*TS* 3.23, 243-44) or again "ass", on account of "preconceptions" (*TS* 8.32, 717), the game with the ambiguity of reference – "You shall see the very place, Madam" (*TS* 9.20, 772) –,<sup>6</sup> the systematic infelicity of verbal communication are all constitutive of the rhetorical management of the Shandean heroes' mishandlings at the hands of fortune, the agent of fortune being, of necessity, Sterne's pen. Time and again the narrator reminds the reader, not only of the human capacity for mistake – "How finely we argue upon mistaken facts!" (*TS* 4.27, 379) –,

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<sup>4</sup> The latitudinarian views adopted by the Church of England after the Puritan/Cromwellian episode can be understood as pertaining to what Richard Popkin has termed "fideistic scepticism", to distinguish scepticism as a principle of doubt and suspension of judgment from scepticism as non-belief in God. Latitudinarianism was well able to accommodate potential religious fervour, frequent philosophical inconsistency, and pragmatic anti-reformist adaptation to social life. In its relative tolerance of pluralism, it contributed to what has sometimes been described as a national consensus in Great Britain after the trauma of the civil war. With all his idiosyncracies, Sterne was a mainstream clergyman, comfortable with the refusal of dogmatic disputes, and a fervent and effective preacher.

<sup>5</sup> Wood is not the first to make such an observation; D. H. Lawrence asserts in his essay "Why the Novel Matters" that "the Bible—but *all* the Bible—and Homer, and Shakespeare: these are the supreme old novels. These are all things to all men. Which means that in their wholeness they affect the whole man alive, which is the man himself, beyond any part of him" (Lawrence, 536).

<sup>6</sup> Despite Sterne's lamenting, in a moment of discouragement, that "[i]t is too much to write books and find heads to understand them" (letter to John Eustace, 9 February 1768, *Letters*, 646), it is precisely "in its readiness (indeed its expectation) to be misread" – what I am calling here its comedy of errors – that *Tristram Shandy* reveals itself to be "a novel, rather than any other literary form from which it borrows" (Descargues, 408).

but of the human instinctive preference for, or rather attraction to going astray, which is another name for digressing (or the *perseverare* of *errare*). And although elucidation and discovery are part of the dynamics of the narrative, it is not the purpose of a “Cock and [...] Bull” (*TS* 9.33, 809) story to prevent mistakes and redress misconceptions: Sterne’s narrative does not excise errors, it multiplies them. In this famous last scene, there is no chance of a return to a normal narration or a reliable narrator, such as Wood identifies in religious comedy, which equals satire, and presupposes stable – if occasionally “slippery” – categories, to permit “the stability of didacticism” (Wood, 6).

All this error thrives from no other than a biographical ambition, from a hubristic attempt at telling the stories of characters. It is not as if Sterne’s characters were forgotten for the benefit of “a long, banging satirical poem” which could bear, for instance, on novelists’ capacity for blinding themselves regarding their narrative powers;<sup>7</sup> rather, the comedy springs from the consciously unequal struggle between the material of life and the attempt at being a biographical writer. We do live “364 times faster” than we write (*TS* 4.13, 342) and trying to record life leads to the absurdity in logic and grammar whereby “a cow broke in (tomorrow morning) to my uncle Toby’s fortifications” (*TS* 3.38, 278), for which there is no redress, even though Trim wants himself tried by a court-martial and the cow shot. Error is generated by the biographical drive; but it is also heuristic.

Significantly, the want of any character sufficiently “realised” to satisfy the reader’s need for identification is essential in the training of the reader of *Tristram Shandy*. It is because of this initial deficiency (in novelistic terms) that the reader (Sir or Madam) is lulled into a complacent identification with the narrator, as representative of the author. From the beginning Tristram practises a kind of seduction, paying his “truest respect” (*TS* 2.11, 125) – or so he says – to the reader’s understanding, among many other blandishments, when in fact the reader’s capacity for error is counted upon and engineered in the dashes, the asterisks, the attention tests (“read the whole chapter over again” [*TS* 1.20, 65]), the pedagogical games of question and answer lying in ambush everywhere in the text. But it is not only that the reader has to be made a fool of, to feel at one with the Shandy parlour experience, it is rather that the reader is caught up in a narrative over which nobody (and not even the author) wishes to have more than approximate control: “I am confident that my own way of [beginning a book] is the best—I’m sure it is the most

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<sup>7</sup> Just as Swift’s *Gulliver* has been described by Alain Bony as the satirical anticipation of the novel reader (Bony, 55-56).

religious—for I begin with writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second” (*TS* 8.2, 656). In fact the reader’s right to misunderstand is made use of to enrich the possible interplays of meanings in the text: there is an accepted powerlessness to control and direct meaning in *Tristram Shandy*, which engineers a fall into plurality, open-endedness and the unending debate of interpretation. We are at sea, and lost at sea, on the mapless marbled page. *Tristram Shandy* is eager to be misread, as much as it is to be read.

But here we might pause to take consolation from the fact that Tristram lines himself beside us in this comedy of incomprehension. We are all familiar with the squirrel cage which turns up in volume 7, and I have to confess I am no better acquainted with the motion of the cage now (at 59 years of age in a rainy summer in the north of France), having painstakingly learned to decode intertextual references with the help of annotators, than when I started reading *Tristram Shandy*, 30 years ago, missing most of the scholarly references and nevertheless trotting on from one comic revelation to another, and on and on. But mercifully, Sterne’s text has anticipated such readerly despair:

Now, of all things in the world, I understand the least of mechanism—I have neither genius, or taste, or fancy—and have a brain so entirely unapt for every thing of that kind, that I solemnly declare I was never yet able to comprehend the principles of motion of a squirrel cage, or a common knife-grinder’s wheel—tho’ I have many an hour of my life look’d up with great devotion at the one—and stood by with as much patience as any christian ever could do, at the other— (*TS* 7.30, 626)

Some of us can identify with this bafflement, I think (if you just replace the knife-grinder’s wheel with our computers, for example); furthermore, there is no annotation on this passage in the Florida edition (which nevertheless has something to say about “milk and coffee” and about “valet de place”, just before and just after the passage [The Notes, 482])... This must be a good sign, an indication that there might be a little chink for a poor French academic to worm her way into the great machinery of Sternean humour.

Now, secular comedy is for James Wood the comedy of “deliberate opacity” (6), of “irresponsibility” or “unreliability” or “forgiveness” (13, 12). (We need a small proviso here: when writing “irresponsible”, I think Wood rather means “not responsible”, not answerable, not part of a coherent system.) Secular comedy, for him, plunges its roots in Shakespeare’s theatre. This consideration of Shakespeare detached from a more strictly historical Renaissance context is owing to his development of “rambling

consciousness, those moments when a character is allowed to drift, [...] to travel into apparent irrelevance, to be beside the point. It is through rambling that absent-mindedness in the modern novel appears” (19).<sup>8</sup>

That Shakespeare should travel in time and transcend most categories, literary or historical, is no surprise. Shakespeare is twice modern, it would seem: modern in the sense used by historians, as characterizing the end of the Middle Ages and the integration of the new world and the old; and modern, says Wood, in the (more restrictive) use of the adjective “modern” as in the phrase “modern novel”. I am not sure this phrase does not confuse rather than clarify matters in the present discussion, and I had rather use modern (when not synonymous with Renaissance) for the “moderns” rejected by Swift in the eighteenth century. I shall avoid using the phrase “modern novel” myself therefore, when not quoting Wood, because it is far too wide in meaning and can be applied to several types of fiction at different times in history, contrary to the “modernist novel”, which can be assigned a place and a definition in the history of literature.

Yet while Wood acknowledges the roots of secular comedy in Shakespeare’s theatre, he equally deems it “in direct proportion to the growth of characters’ fictive inner lives” (8). As he also says, and as I think we can mostly agree, “Sterne’s characters are not fully realised creatures with interior lives”; ergo not qualifying for Wood’s modernist “modern novel”; ergo satirical rather than novelistic. Let me oppose this syllogism with whoever’s example will help me in the Shandy gallery. Toby or Trim will do as well as widow Wadman, or Tristram, or for that matter the fat scullion.

There is indeed a lack of commitment to the self in *Tristram Shandy*, which makes it a comedy of errors, rather than a tragedy of misunderstanding. As Adam Thirlwell suggests, in another context of *Tristram Shandy*, “comedy is the enemy of the self” (Thirlwell, 19).<sup>9</sup> The seriousness of self exposure found in the modernist novel is checked in Sterne’s religious conviction by the redeeming notion that in the end the individual, abysmal though he may be, is held in the safety net of Christian religion and cannot be his or her own judge. This, we may remember, is precisely the argument used by George Steiner in *The Death of Tragedy* to claim the inferiority of Christian Renaissance drama to that of the more

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<sup>8</sup> In the second chapter of *The Irresponsible Self*, Wood provides an inspired commentary on Mistress Quickly’s tirade as she is “trying to get Falstaff to pay his debts” (*Henry IV*, part 2), in the tavern at Eastcheap (Wood, 24-27).

<sup>9</sup> Focusing on the relationship between desire, lust, and the comic in *Tristram Shandy*, Thirlwell writes: “the true comic subject is desire. [...] The novel is the form where desire gets vaporized into comedy” (19).



heroic Greeks, unprotected by the idea of salvation. But Sterne's peculiar mode of representation ensures that his characters, however unrealised they may be, are always both seen from an inside perspective, sentient and suffering, and from the outside.

The episode of Bobby's death is famous for its illustration of Locke's theory of the association of ideas, and for its depiction of the illusion of communication. "We had a fat foolish scullion—my father, I think, kept her for her simplicity;—she had been all autumn struggling with a dropsy. He [Tristram's brother] is dead! said Obadiah,—he is certainly dead!—So am not I, said the foolish scullion" (*TS* 5.7, 430). In her unrealisedness (she comes second only to the mule of the Abbess of Andouilletts),<sup>10</sup> the fat vulnerable scullion of volume 5 remains as perfectly alive and present as Shakespeare's cowardly Parolles in his starkest declaration of persistence: "simply the thing I am / Shall make me live".<sup>11</sup> This is also where laughter takes over and subsumes satire in *Tristram Shandy* within another form of comedy, and where Sterne, I think, is too much of a dramatist, and too good a dramatist – which is to say, of the Shakespearean kind, not a late Jonsonian proponent of the comedy of humours – to be set down (and put down?) as a satirist.

In the chapters following the same episode of Bobby's death, Trim, who fancies himself some orator, as we know, improvises a funeral oration. All the while, Susannah dreams of the dresses she is going to get from Tristram's mother who will have to go into mourning, while listening somewhat complacently to the corporal's sermon:

I own it, that from *Whitsontide* to within three weeks of *Christmas*, —'tis not long—'tis like nothing; [...] And trust me, *Suzy*, added the corporal, turning to *Susannah*, whose eyes were swimming in water,—before that time comes round again,—many a bright eye will be dim.—*Susannah* placed it to the right side of the page—she wept—but she curtsied too.—Are we not, continued *Trim*, looking still at *Susannah*—are we not like a flower of the field—a tear of pride stole in betwixt every two tears of humiliation—else no tongue could have described *Susannah's* affliction—is not all flesh grass?—'Tis clay,—'tis dirt.—They all looked directly at

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<sup>10</sup> Even tired mules are entitled to their cue and their dose of narratorial empathy in *Tristram Shandy*: "By my fig! said [the elder mule], I'll go no further—And if I do, replied the other—they shall make a drum of my hide.— / And so with one consent they stopp'd thus—" (*TS* 7.21, 610).

<sup>11</sup> "Captain I'll be no more; / But I will eat and drink, and sleep as soft / As captain shall: simply the thing I am / Shall make me live" (*All's Well That Ends Well*, act 4, scene 3, 320-23).

the scullion,—the scullion had just been scouring a fish-kettle.—It was not fair.—

—What is the finest face that ever man looked at!—I could hear *Trim* talk so for ever, cried *Susannah*,—what is it! (*Susannah* laid her hand upon *Trim's* shoulder)—but corruption?—*Susannah* took it off. (*TS* 5.9, 434-35)

Such a scene (a monologue with numerous stage directions) presents us with the most amazing entanglement of rambling consciousness, where nobody gets it right. The oration itself, which is introduced as an illustration of the entertainingly deplorable flaws of communication – “Well might *Locke* write a chapter upon the imperfections of words” (*TS* 5.7, 429) – provides the occasion for a very often quoted narratorial intervention:

—Now I love you for this—and ’tis this delicious mixture within you which makes you dear creatures what you are— and he who hates you for it—all I can say of the matter, is—That he has either a pumkin for his head—or a pippin for his heart,—and whenever he is dissected ’twill be found so. (*TS* 5.9.435)

This passage and its commentary are themselves parallel to the episode of the sermon “The Abuses of Conscience” in volume 2, with its implacable demonstration of the prevalence of vanities, hobby horses and incongruities in most situations of communication, and in the face of good (however solemnly expressed) intentions. If the insertion of the sermon in the novel proves anything, this must have to do with the pitfalls of didacticism. In J. Paul Hunter’s consistently pessimistic interpretation, it even “raises the question of whether any sermon, according to *Tristram Shandy*, will have its desired effect on human beings” (Hunter, 629).

“For now we see through a glass, darkly”, said Paul in one of his epistles to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13: 12), a statement which would have been central to the corpus of practical reminders of the need for humility and the denunciation of pride, which Sterne, as most clerics in his time, endlessly resorted to in his preaching. And surely Sterne the priest could not accommodate the “delicious mixture” within human beings as blithely – yes; and, now that we have interrogated the word, as “irresponsibly” – as the writer of a secular book. We could provide many examples in which he used his dramatic powers of persuasion, when preaching from the pulpit, to put errors right – serious moral errors – and to denounce bad

faith and its ally complacency or “good conscience”,<sup>12</sup> conforming indeed to the pattern of religious comedy or satire.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, it is instructive to juxtapose Saint Paul’s dark glass with the self-declared “nonsensical” treatment of the same motive in Sterne’s secular comedy/novel, *Tristram Shandy*:

If the fixure of Momus's glass, in the human breast, according to the proposed emendation of that arch-critick, had taken place,—first, This foolish consequence would certainly have followed,—That the very wisest and the very gravest of us all, in one coin or other, must have paid window-money every day of our lives.

And, secondly, That had the said glass been there set up, nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man's character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptrical bee-hive, and look'd in, [...] then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen, and could have sworn to: --- But this is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this planet [...] (TS 1.23, 82-83)

The juxtaposition reminds us that an image has several handles: it may be taken for banter, but also for serious moral or for serious imaginative purposes. Likewise a joke: Yorick’s jesting should be taken amiably, for “mere jocundity of humour” (TS 1.12, 30); still, “for every ten jokes,--- thou hast got a hundred enemies” (TS 1.12, 31), Eugenius warns Yorick, before the latter dies “quite broken hearted” (TS 1.12, 33). Spared this premature ending, the parlour in Shandy Hall is the place of a thousand reconciliations and epiphanies through laughter. Because Sterne, Christopher Ricks has commented, “whatever his faults of taste, was never guilty of reducing men to bees, of believing that we can pluck the heart out of their mystery [...]” (Ricks, xiii). And Ricks of course provides us here with another reference to Shakespeare, with Hamlet’s memorable remonstrance to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me, you would

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<sup>12</sup> “Trust —Trust we have a good conscience!” (TS 2.17, 143) is the opening line of “The Abuses of Conscience Considered” (sermon 26), the sermon in *Tristram Shandy*.

<sup>13</sup> As a priest, Sterne used satire to parry the difficulty of knowing oneself; as in the sermon “Self Knowledge” (sermon 4), in which he dramatically and comically stages the confusion and denunciation of David by Nathan. This sermon refers to an apocryphal sermon attributed to Swift, “Of the Difficulty of Knowing Oneself”. Nathan gradually and socratically makes David aware of his own misconduct in appropriating the wife of a man who has always been loyal to him.

seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery [...]”<sup>14</sup>.

The “mystery” of error-prone human nature, for Sterne, lay in the “delicious mixture” which he celebrated explicitly in the commentary quoted above. As I have written in an earlier essay, apropos Sterne’s agreement with the mainstream culture of the Church of England in his day: “In a sense the audacity of [Sterne’s] play with meaning in *Tristram Shandy* is quite in tune with the vision of a world in the hands of God, in which man is not in the end his own judge [...] Under the eyes of a God of forgiveness rather than awe, there is room for carefree play” (Descargues, 87). There is room for treating error(s) as would a Shakespearean fool, to create another world of jubilant discourse. The more errors, the more gleeful the pursuit of the laugh-at-able, the more endless the search of truth, the better and more human for us all.

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<sup>14</sup> *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 2, 365-66.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “MAKE THEM LIKE UNTO A WHEEL”: MOTION AND HUMOUR IN *TRISTRAM SHANDY*

ANNE DROMART

In his letter to Sophie Volland dated October 7, 1762, Diderot termed *Tristram Shandy* “ce livre si fou, si sage et si gai”<sup>1</sup> (Diderot, 456) whereas Horace Walpole considered it “a very insipid and tedious performance” (Howes, 55). Such contrasted reactions to the book have strikingly been the norm since its publication as if the peculiar humour it contains was not to everybody’s taste: Walpole, for one, reduced it to “the whole narration going backwards”. If he didn’t find the technique felicitous, nevertheless with admirable insight he did locate what forms the ground rules of Sterne’s humour, that is, the unceasing movement created by the narration. The sudden curtailment of a chapter, the absence of all coherent and linear narrative form, and the abundance of metaphors that force the reader to move from one cognitive domain to another exemplify a constant change in focus that creates instability in the narrative. What is clearly meant to be a source of discomfort for the reader is also meant to trigger amusement and sometimes laughter. This paper argues that Laurence Sterne bases his humour on motion, and that he does so in a desire to move away from the tiresome, vexatious miseries of life – “because ours is a world of squeaky hinges and swiftly falling sash-windows” (Norton, 406).

Humour in *Tristram Shandy* generally relies on the awareness of a gap between reality and its representation. This gap can appear in the text in the form of a disproportionate comment on a trifling event, which serves as humorous amplification, as when Tristram suggests Phutatorius’ neglect of his open breeches “should be a warning to all mankind” (4.27, 381). More generally, Sterne makes it clear throughout the book that what can be said about facts cannot be taken at face value, and repeatedly he

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<sup>1</sup> “So insane, so wise, so lively” (my translation).

playfully and swiftly displaces the subject of the narration, so swiftly that the reader is often caught unawares to the point that he or she can be at a loss as to what exactly is at stake, as is the case with knots, noses, crevices or door-hinges for instance. “Many of Sterne’s devices depend on surprise for their effect: his rapid transitions, apostrophic interruptions, parenthetical digressions, are all, in a measure, shock tactics. They are designed to keep the reader alert” (Stedmond, 39). Laurence Sterne has a way of moving semantics from concrete to abstract domains, thereby creating rapid and repeated shifts from one area of thought to another, interior/exterior, immobility/movement, abstract/concrete, etc, in a “comic use of *non sequitur*” (Stedmond, 75) as this sentence from the chestnut episode shows: “the soul of *Phutatorius*, together with all his ideas, his thoughts, his attention, his imagination, judgment, resolution, deliberation, ratiocination, memory, fancy, with ten battalions of animal spirits, all tumultuously crowded down, through different defiles and circuits, to the place in danger, leaving all the upper regions, as you may imagine, as empty as my purse” (4.27, 382). Accumulation, epic tone, metaphors and jests delineate a multiple-layered script where the pain and panic caused by the hot chestnut cohabit with a war skirmish and troops rushing to the site of battle, along with the stupidity of *Phutatorius*. To better expose the man, Sterne, instead of referring to the burning heat of the chestnut that *Phutatorius* cannot account for, continues: “With the best intelligence which all these messengers could bring him back, *Phutatorius* was not able to dive into the secret of what was going forwards below”. Through their metaphoric value, words have two possible meanings (like “dive” here) and suggest the existence of two different stories, that of the actual chestnut, and that of *Phutatorius*’ delirious and guilty imagination and stupidity. Metaphors force the reader’s mind to move from one cognitive domain to another and the book is fraught with such enforced mental journeys like the one exemplified by this sentence: “the peace of *Utrecht* was within an ace of creating the same shyness betwixt my uncle *Toby* and his hobby-horse, as it did betwixt the queen and the rest of the confederating powers” (6.34, 559).

Modern linguistic theories of humour have explained the fundamentals of a humorous statement: the presence of duality that creates tension between the two competing scripts making two possible scenarios, the tension being resolved when we realize that our expectations in following one script have been fooled because it is the second script that is prevailing (Attardo 1994). “A humorous text must relate to two different and opposing in some way scenarios; this duality is not detected at first by the person who is processing the text; a certain element in the text betrays