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# The Dual Face of the Grotesque in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Lenz's *Der Waldbruder*

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LILIAN R. FURST

## ABSTRACT

The grotesque represents a disruption of the expected normative pattern; the deviation may assume either comic or horrendous guise, or both at once as in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Lenz's *Der Waldbruder*. The two works are contemporaneous, and Lenz was one of the first Germans to appreciate *Tristram Shandy*. In both novels the ludicrously humorous face of the grotesque is readily apparent in the preposterous plots as in the style and narrative techniques which convey the unpredictability of existence through the use of such devices as anti-climax, exaggeration and irony. But beneath the outer crust of comedy there lurks a sub-stratum of the horrendous. Somber undertones are implicit in both works in content and form. (LRF)

I would like to begin with some definition of the grotesque that goes beyond the dictionary synonyms: "quaint," "bizarre," "fantastic," "ridiculous," "ludicrous," "absurd," "exaggerated," "humorously extravagant or incongruous." To my mind, the essence of the grotesque resides in a disruption of the expected normative pattern; it is, as Wolfgang Kayser has so aptly put it, "das Bild einer verkehrten Welt"<sup>1</sup> in which the known order of reality has somehow been shattered. In its jolting effect it is related to caricature, to parody, to the comic, and, in its fundamental ambivalence, to the tragi-comic. For the distortion that lies at the heart of the grotesque may become manifest either in humorous guise or in the rebarbative appearance of the gargoyles. In both instances there is the same abrupt departure from the norm, the same sense of incongruity, the same mechanism of shock irrespective of the actual form in which the grotesque appears — whether it is predominantly fantastic or satirical in direction, whether it veers towards the ludicrous or towards the horrendous. It is this essentially dualistic character of the grotesque that I want to delineate in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Lenz's *Der Waldbruder*.

The two works are virtually contemporaneous: *Tristram Shandy* appeared in successive volumes between 1760 and 1767, while *Der*

*Waldbruder* dates from 1776. By then Sterne was already well-known in Germany: the first German translation of *Tristram Shandy*, a regrettably poor version by Johann Friedrich Zückert published in 1763, was followed in 1774 by Johann Joachim Christoph Bode's better and fuller rendering, whose list of 150 subscribers included Goethe, Herder, Hamann, Klopstock, Gleim, Claudius, Gerstenberg, Jacobi, Hippel and Wieland who wanted no less than five copies! By 1775 the *Gothaische Gelehrte Zeitungen* reported that the writings of "Laurentius Sterne" were "die Lieblingslektüre seiner Nation, und unter alle den aufgeklärten Nationen Europens, besonders der Deutschen."<sup>2</sup> That probably referred primarily to *The Sentimental Journey* which had been translated in 1768 and which had a more direct appeal to the *Sturm und Drang* than *Tristram Shandy* whose whimsicality seemed to many Germans mere nonsensical twaddle. Lenz, however, evidently relished *Tristram Shandy*. In the second scene of the *Divertissement* to *Die Christen in Abyssinien oder die neue Schätzung* he adds this special footnote to a stinging phrase about "Witz": "Hierunter ist nicht der Schade des freundlichen Onkel Toby zu verstehen. Siehe den berühmten Tristram Shandy des Herrn Sterne."<sup>3</sup> Lenz's appreciation of *Tristram Shandy* may well have stemmed from his — conscious or subconscious — recognition of his latent affinity to Sterne in their parallel awareness of the dual nature of the grotesque.

Of the two faces of the grotesque, it is the ludicrously humorous one that strikes us most readily in both works. This is largely because the basic situation is preposterous to the point of extravaganza in the English and the German narrative alike. In both instances, the content represents a comic distortion into the absurdity of the grotesque. And the distortion is two-fold in each case: a distortion not only of the familiar circumstances of life, of birth and love respectively, but also of recognized literary genres, the picaresque tale of adventure and the epistolary novel common in the eighteenth century. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is a caricature of the customary adventures of the picaresque hero. His life begins literally *ab ovum* with the night of his conception, and by the middle of the fourth volume, as he himself admits,<sup>4</sup> he is "no farther than to my first day's life." As for his experiences before and after birth, they are accidents rather than adventures, or to use his own words again,<sup>5</sup> "some of the oddest and most whimsical distresses:" the need to wind up the clock disturbs his conception, his nose is mashed at birth, he is baptized with the wrong name, and circumcised by mischance. These are bizarre deflections of the problems traditionally confronted by the hero. But then the world into which Tristram is born is a wholly topsy-turvy

one peopled with the weirdest collection of zanies. The clauses in his mother's marriage contract regarding her right to confinement in London, her false-alarm pregnancy the previous year whereby she forfeited that right, the series of errors, bunglings, confusions attendant on his birth: all these are part of the famous Shandean System which is, of course, the very opposite of a system, rather the expression of a totally erratic realm chronically at cross-purposes so that what is contrary to expectation almost becomes the expected, as when Tristram is given the very name his father abhors. The disruption of the normative pattern into the grotesquely comic is plainly apparent throughout as Sterne directs his gaze — I quote from a letter of his<sup>6</sup> — at “every Thing . . . ., which I find Laugh-at-able in my way.”

Lenz too seems to be laughing at men and at the world in *Der Waldbruder* in which the ludicrously grotesque often assumes a form closely related to that of *Tristram Shandy*. Again we find ourselves plunged into an utterly unpredictable world where relationships often turn out to be the opposite of what they initially appear — although even of this we cannot be sure. In both works, the disruption illustrates what Bergson called “the snowball effect:” The mechanical concatenation of events, causes, and effects, each of which knocks down the next in a crazily illogical sequence. This is what happens with Tristram's birth, and it happens likewise in *Der Waldbruder* in Herz's crucial misidentification of the Gräfin Stella as the writer of the tender letters with whom he had fallen in love sight unseen. Just as the sequence of Tristram's mishaps stems from the circumstances of his conception, so Herz's adversities devolve from his cardinal misapprehension of the situation. Banal little happenings turn out to have vast consequences in the lives of both heroes, who are not by chance alike compared to Don Quixote. Their lack of control over outer circumstances lands them in predicaments that are veritable blue-prints for the comic grotesque. Corresponding to Tristram's sundry misadventures are Herz's embarrassing entanglement with Witwe Hohl, who imagines him to be in love with her, his manic pursuit of at least a painting of his beloved, and his pre-history as a lover beginning with his passion — at age eleven — for his father's mistress! The abrupt swing from one extreme to another is characteristic of the essential incongruity of Herz's as of Tristram's universe; and ultimately it is this incongruity that is the source of the ludicrously grotesque.

This comic aspect of the grotesque is manifest in the narrative technique, too. Style and rhythm reflect and express the fundamental unpredictability of existence in a disjointedness that is the

verbal equivalent of the grotesque. The see-saw pattern of alternating actions in *Tristram Shandy* and alternating view-points in *Der Waldbruder* represent an archetypal disruption of the smooth norm. The impression of discontinuity is reinforced in *Tristram Shandy* by various other devices: the famous digressions, the false starts and unkept promises, the conversations with imagined readers, the retardations and interruptions, the “comic syntax,” as Ian Watt<sup>7</sup> has termed it, with its heavy reliance on the loose connecting link of the dash, the typographical high jinks: all these add up to a wriggling, tortuous movement whose unexpected oscillations offer a concrete image of the grotesque. Something of the same effect emerges in *Der Waldbruder* from the division into letters, the necessity of piecing together jagged fragments of the story, the sudden breaks, the frequent recourse to exaggeration and irony. These are the hallmarks of a world that has lost its sense of proportion and deviated into the grotesque. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the widespread use in both works of anti-climax, an inflation to a dramatic and rhetorical peak from which the reader is toppled into an almost perverse deflation. Let me cite just two instances of the exploitation of this trick: Tristram’s father, in his dire distress at his son’s misnaming, which follows closely on the mashing of his nose, “could not lie down with this affliction for his life – nor could he carry it upstairs like the other – He walked composedly out with it to the fish pond.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Fräulein Schatouilleuse, announcing that the Gräfin Stella is engaged to a wealthy old man, comments: “Diese Nachricht, versichert, wird Herrn Herzen übel schmecken. Wenn er sie nur nicht gar zu plump erfährt, ich glaube, er erschießt sich” – and then, as if in the same breath, she goes on: “Wissen Sie mir nicht zu sagen, ob man in Braunsberg gute weiche Flockseide bekommt? Und was dort die chinesischen Blumen gelten. Bringen Sie mir welche mit, die Leute sind hier judenmässig teuer.”<sup>9</sup> The comic face of the grotesque grins at us here in all its absurd extravagance.

But there is a menace in that grin, too, a hint of man’s helplessness in the face of fate as well as of man’s inhumanity to man. For beneath the outer crust of comedy there lurks a sub-stratum of the horrendous. This dark dimension of the grotesque is certainly implicit in both *Tristram Shandy* and *Der Waldbruder*.

The traditional view of *Tristram Shandy* as a comic novel has been modified by recent critics increasingly conscious of its somber undertones. Ben Reid, in a perceptive article on “The Sad Hilarity of Sterne,” has pointed to “the recessive tragic” strand so important in the work’s “complex alloy.”<sup>10</sup> More specifically, William B. Piper, under the heading “Tristram’s Dilemma,”<sup>11</sup> has enumerated the

painful facts of Tristram's life: he is his family's sole survivor, his childhood misfortunes have made certain the family's extinction, and his own death is approaching. In other words, his past is pitiful, his present desolate, and his future hopeless. Indeed, the shadow of death broods over *Tristram Shandy*:<sup>12</sup> the deaths of Yorick, Le Fever, Trim, Bobby, great-aunt Dinah, oblique acknowledgments of the deaths of Toby, his mother and his father, and several hints of his own impending end in references to his "vile cough"<sup>13</sup> which may well kill him within the next year. Life as a whole is seen as "a long chapter of chances,"<sup>14</sup> a constant succession of frustrations. It is worth mentioning in this context that Uncle Toby and Walter Shandy ride *hobby-horses*, not real horses, hobby-horses that get nowhere and that are fitting symbols of the thwarting of man's will into a childish futility. So the topsy-turvy world of *Tristram Shandy* represents an image, to quote Ben Reid again, not only of "the harmless little comic ravine between the normal and the hyperbolic" but also of "the gaping tragic crevasse between the real and the ideal."<sup>15</sup>

The formal play with the grotesque also proves ambivalent. The disorder that places the dedication in the eighth chapter and the preface in the middle of the volume, the action that is going nowhere (like the hobby-horses, incidentally), the end that is no real ending, the intricate oxymoronic ironies, the edging out of the plot in favor of the presenter-reader relationship: all these justify the descriptions that have lately been attached to *Tristram Shandy*: "an anti-book,"<sup>16</sup> "a *reductio ad absurdum* of the novel form."<sup>17</sup> In the last resort, *Tristram Shandy* mirrors man's disorientation in a world devoid of certainties.

This holds equally true of *Der Waldbruder*. The sense of a chaotic world and of man's total bewilderment in it assumes really frightening proportions here. When Herz is called the "irrender Ritter"<sup>18</sup> the reference is to Don Quixote, but even more to the errors, the random straying, the confusion that characterize his whole path, as indeed that of his fellow protagonists. Living in a land of "grenzenloser Schimären" (p. 96), in "Selbstbetrug" (p. 97), "Mißverstand" (p. 97), "lauter Phantasien" (p. 109), he cherishes an amazing series of illusions about himself and about others. No wonder that the theme of masks and disguises is so prominent in *Der Waldbruder*. It is, significantly, "auf der Maskerade" (p. 79) that Herz first glimpses the woman he takes to be the object of his affections. When the deliberate disguise of the mask fuses with the role-playing conventional in social intercourse, even graver dangers of deception arise. Nearly all the characters in *Der Waldbruder* are involved in some form of

pretense as is suggested by the frequent occurrence of such terms as "Drama" (p. 102), "künstliche Rollen," "verstellen," "betrügen," "repräsentieren" (p. 101). But while the majority are playing society's standard game, Herz in the remoteness of his rural retreat is engaged on his own private pursuit — and it is no game to him. Like Tristram Shandy's, his "Stück könne eher tragisch als komisch enden" (p. 102). The threat of his death is explicitly voiced in the reiterated warnings about his "unvermeidlicher Untergang" (p. 105), the likelihood of his suicide when his dreams are rudely shattered. And if Herz is the most extreme, he is by no means the only example of a catastrophic derangement of feelings. Witwe Hohl and Frau von Weylach are attenuated echoes of Herz's muddledness so that even the stalwart, clear-sighted figures, Rothe and Plettenberg, eventually despair of any remedy. For they come to recognize — as does the reader — the fundamental dislocation of human instincts in this world gone askew. It is this that Goethe no doubt had in mind when he alluded to the "Fratze"<sup>19</sup> for which Lenz showed such a preference. The "Fratze," however, is the sinister grimace of the dark aspect of the grotesque. And it confronts us as insistently in *Tristram Shandy* and *Der Waldbruder* as the ludicrous grin of its comic face.

The balance between these twin aspects of the grotesque is at variance in the two works. The comic predominates in *Tristram Shandy*, the horrendous in *Der Waldbruder*. The difference runs right through from the personality of the hero to the manner of narration, the mood and the *Weltanschauung*. While Tristram, the sad clown, has an abundant measure of self-detachment, Herz, the foolish philosopher, is absorbed in self-pity. Since Tristram presents himself as a comic victim (rather than as a tragic sufferer) of time's dreadful workings, the reader is pathetically involved in a comic situation, whereas, in *Der Waldbruder*, the opposite happens, for we are the half-perplexed, half-amused spectators of a tragic situation. The shift of view-point inherent in the epistolary form of *Der Waldbruder* intensifies our uncertainty. On the other hand, the constant unifying presence of Tristram and the confidentiality between the narrator and the reader lend some degree of stability to *Tristram Shandy*. In the final analysis, Sterne is operating as a humorist: benevolent and optimistic in outlook, rumbustious, genial and whimsical in expression, even though the jocularly serves in part as a screen to the underlying somberness of life of which he was well aware. Lenz, by contrast, has a sharper edge to his satire, a more bitter intuition of the absurdity of life and above all of its terrifying proximity to the existential abyss. While Sterne saw the grotesque from the relative safety of the Enlightenment primarily as a distortion

into the ludicrous, Lenz already partook of our modern consciousness of its ominous potential.

Both use the grotesque as a vehicle for the tragi-comic perception of life which they share. It is no coincidence that Lenz was one of the few Germans to appreciate *Tristram Shandy* at a time when his compatriots were mostly gushing over Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*. In spite of the difference in their emphasis, Sterne and Lenz saw in the grotesque the dual face of human life.

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#### NOTES

1. *Das Groteske in Malerei und Dichtung* (Oldenburg: Stalling, 1957), p. 37.
  2. *Gothaische Gelehrte Zeitungen*, 1775, part 2, p. 787.
  3. Jacob Michael Reinhold Lenz, *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin: Reimer, 1928), III, 312.
  4. Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 231.
- All subsequent references are to this edition.
5. *Tristram Shandy*, p. 174.
  6. Letter of 23 May, 1759 to Richard Dodsley, *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis Perry Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 76.
  7. "The Comic Syntax of *Tristram Shandy*," in *Studies in Criticism and Aesthetics*, ed. Howard Johnson and John S. Shea (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), pp. 315-331.
  8. *Tristram Shandy*, p. 236.
  9. Jacob Michael Reinhold Lenz, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Ernst Lewy (Berlin: Cassirer, 1909), IV, 93. All subsequent references are to this edition.
  10. *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 36 (1956), pp. 118 and 126.
  11. *Laurence Sterne* (New York: Twayne, 1965), pp. 21-30.
  12. See W.B.C. Watkins, "Yorick Revisited," in *Perilous Balance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1939), pp. 99-156.
  13. *Tristram Shandy*, p. 275.
  14. *Tristram Shandy*, p. 226.
  15. *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 36 (1956), p. 129.
  16. Gerald Weales, "Tristram Shandy's Anti-Book," in *Twelve Original Essays* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 43-67.
  17. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 292.
  18. Lenz, *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, 112.
  19. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Werke*, ed. Robert Petsch (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1926), XVI, 147.