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# The Artifice of Failure in *Tristram Shandy*

ANDREW WRIGHT

*Tristram Shandy* does not really begin *ab ovo*, though the narrator claims it does. Neither does it begin *in medias res*. Outrageously and appropriately it begins *in flagrante delicto*. It begins as a sexual joke, and remains just that until, after nine volumes, the cock-and-bull story ceases without concluding. The novel is about how any one comes to know anything, it is about reality more intensely than are most other novels, and the inconclusive conclusion is presented rather than stated: man is a mystery, and the world is inscrutable; the ordinary modes of apprehension and analysis are totally inadequate to the tasks they are called upon to perform; life itself is ineffable, ineluctable, and certainly tragic—redeemed, in so far as redemption may be possible, by laughter, which makes sport of the mystery; by love, which accepts it; and by art, which re-creates it. Narration in chronological terms is as false to life's complexity as is an epistemology based upon the "transverse zig-zaggery" (in Uncle Toby's phrase, used in another connection) of Locke's theory of the association of ideas. Against the conventional mode of story-telling and the "idiosyncratic wilfulness"<sup>1</sup> of Locke, Sterne sets the figure of a circle, and it may be said that the novel's structure is peripheral. If the reader, and Sterne, are little nearer an understanding of the heart of the matter at the end of the novel than at the beginning, at least the ordinary mendacities by which men live have been discredited, and the magnitude of life's difficulties has been exposed to view. The testing of all hypotheses has ended in failure, but in the endeavor the circle has been drawn: the effort itself has led to the making of a work of art.

"It is not things themselves," says the epigraph from Epictetus, "that disturb men, but their judgments about these things." And one of the tasks of *Tristram Shandy* is to capture or recapture the sense of things as things. It is a scientific novel, conceived in the spirit of serendipity—the only approach that a self-respecting scientist can arguably take. The novel is written in the first person, supposedly by the eponymous hero of the tale, whose "double prerogative of narrator and commentator, of observer and material witness, of writer and philosopher" (the words are those of Henri Fluchère) is maintained throughout. And the attitude is necessarily one of "constant vigilance."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This phrase is Sigurd Burckhardt's, in "*Tristram Shandy's Law of Gravity*," *ELH*, XXVIII (1961), 70.

<sup>2</sup> *Laurence Sterne: from Tristram to Yorick: An Interpretation of Tristram Shandy*, trans. and abridged by Barbara Bray (London, 1965), p. 55.

The tone, on the other hand, is that of somewhat uneasy and even disingenuous assurance, the assurance of the—clergyman: Tristram addresses those who read his work variously as good folks, sir, madam, and my lord and even allows these readers to come forward as interlocutors: “—How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter? I told you in it, *that my mother was not a papist*. —Papist! You told me no such thing, Sir. Madam, I beg leave to repeat it over again . . .” (p. 43).<sup>3</sup> These addresses, so often reiterated, come to achieve the force of too much protest, a style of familiarity intended to breed neither intimacy nor contempt but distance, so that the spectacle of *Tristram Shandy* cannot be taken too much to heart, that is to say, too literally. The addresses are also amusing, and the sanative purpose of laughter—a commonplace of English psychology in the eighteenth century—is explicit in the very dedication: “I live in a constant endeavor to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles,—but much more so, when he laughs, that it adds something to this Fragment of Life” (p. 2). *Tristram Shandy* is a playful work written in an era when art was regarded as a refined amusement, and when the entertainment of ideas was looked upon with respect as well as with approval.<sup>4</sup>

The story of Tristram’s begetting is one of *coitus interruptus*: “Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, *have you not forgot to wind up the clock?* —*Good G—!* cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time, —*Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?*” (p. 4). The theory that the homunculus or the spermatozoon deposited by Tristram’s father at the moment of coition was “ruffled beyond description” is in fact, and characteristically, a speculative conclusion of Walter Shandy himself; but it is only one of the disasters that attends Tristram’s coming into the world, though all are emblematic of the difficulties, distresses, and accidents that are the human condition. Tristram Shandy, by his own account, is unlucky from the very beginning of conception; and his bad luck includes place of birth—Shandy-Hall rather than London, where his mother might have had better obstetrical attention; the ineptness of Dr. Slop; the

<sup>3</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, ed. Ian Watt (Boston, 1965). All citations are from this edition. On the matter of tone E. M. Forster indicates the disingenuous aspect by calling it that of “a rather deliberate bewilderment”—*Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1927), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> B. H. Lehman puts the matter exactly right, as it seems to me: “The function of laughter in Sterne is corrective, naturally, but not of abuses which may be reformed. His laughter is not to make life more tolerable by tinkering at the minutiae of behavior; it strikes deeper than that.”—“Of Time, Personality, and the Author” (first published in 1941), in Robert Donald Spector, ed., *Essays on the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Bloomington, Ind., 1965), p. 170. In an excellent essay, D. W. Jefferson places the novel in the tradition of learned wit, and declares that “modern readers, especially those of puritan or rationalist mentality, often misunderstand” works written in this tradition, “having lost the idea of a Christian tradition in which so much latitude is possible.”—“*Tristram Shandy* and Its Tradition,” in Boris Ford, ed., *From Dryden to Johnson* ([A Guide to English Literature, vol. IV], revised ed., London, 1962), p. 330. J. M. Stedmond puts the matter well in a consideration of Sterne’s style as it belongs to the anti-Ciceronian tradition: “Implicit in the choice of a looser style is the belief that the act of experiencing an idea is part of its truth, and that the words in which it is expressed must retain the ardor of conception if they are to convey any real meaning to another mind.”—“Style and *Tristram Shandy*,” *MLQ*, XX (1959), 247.

stupidity of Susannah the chambermaid in causing him to be christened Tristram—the unluckiest name in the world—rather than Trismegistus, which is what Walter Shandy had decided on; and even the date of birth, the fifth of November, when treason and plot are called to mind. “I have been,” Tristram says, “the continual sport of what the world calls Fortune” (p. 8) and this lament, lightly spoken but deeply felt, intends to call forth sympathetic response from his readers, who are equally at Fortune’s mercy.

For he is no mere hero. In fact he shares the limelight with Yorick, the parson begotten out of Cervantes and Shakespeare, who can make a jest at death’s expense, who has the nobility of Don Quixote in that he is naturally generous of heart, and who has also the practicality of Sancho Panza in that he learns better than to keep a horse that everyone wants to borrow. Yorick has above all the wisdom of the Shakespearean fool in that he penetrates the masks of solemnity. “Yorick had an invincible dislike and opposition in his nature to gravity; —not to gravity as such; —for where gravity was wanted, he would be the most grave and serious of mortal men for days and weeks together; —but he was an enemy to the affectation of it, and declared open war against it, only as it appeared a cloak for ignorance, or for folly. . . . The very essence of gravity was design, and consequently deceit” (p. 20). But worldly success eludes Yorick. And when his friend Eugenius tries to console the clergyman on his death-bed with the coming probabilities of a bishop’s mitre, Yorick declares himself to be too bruised by the world’s blows to be susceptible of having a head that a mitre would fit.

But Walter Shandy, though nothing of a hero, fares no better. His theory of names is wonderfully logical, or wonderfully an embroidery upon what he imagines to be the methodology of reasonableness. His qualifications include eloquence, ignorance, and pedantry. His volubility has given him the reputation of rhetorical competence, but he has not read Cicero or Quintilian or any of the moderns. Walter Shandy is serious but actuality is beyond him. Philosophy is always breaking in, and so the door continues to squeak, year in and year out, when a drop of oil might have silenced it.

Uncle Toby, on the other hand, rides a hobby horse because he cannot tell anyone about the siege of Namur. But Uncle Toby’s difficulty with words is only an exacerbation of the difficulties which all human beings find themselves in, however clear-headed and articulate. While it is true that “my uncle *Toby* did oft times puzzle his visitors, and sometimes himself too” (p. 63), the nature of language is such that intractable ambiguities confound persons of even the most lucid intelligence. Such is the declaration made by the narrator: “the unsteady uses of words . . . have perplexed the clearest and most exalted understandings” (p. 67). Uncle Toby’s solution is radical: he divorces words from their meaning. As Sigurd Burckhardt says, “He has immersed himself so totally in his creation that words have no reference for him outside it; he lives in a metaphor so embracing and tangible that he is no longer able to see it as a metaphor.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Burckhardt, p. 74.

Even beyond the difficulties of communication, the course of life is so complex as to be irreducible to chronological relation—or in fact to narrative of any sort, however arranged. The only hope for fidelity to experience is a work that is digressive and progressive too, and at the same time. As for scope, the world is really no bigger than “a small circle described upon the circle of the great world, of four *English* miles diameter” (p. 9): such is the universe of the mid-wife, of Shandy-Hall, and especially—in the shape of Uncle Toby’s hobby horse—of the siege of Namur. This last is a comic microcosm in which speculation and action bear little or no relation to one another, in which battles are fought without bloodshed, without defeat, without victory, and without end. But it is also a world in which love and art really exist, and in which mirth and re-creation save souls from despair.<sup>6</sup>

The sermon read by Corporal Trim in *Tristram Shandy* was written by the Reverend Laurence Sterne, and delivered by him at York in July 1750. The text from Hebrews. xiii.18 is “For we trust we have a good conscience,” and it makes the perfectly orthodox and unexceptionable point that conscience unfounded in faith is untrustworthy. In *Tristram Shandy*, however, it is raised—as Yorick’s sermon—to a comic level, the declamation being interrupted not only by the declaimer but by the Roman Catholic Dr. Slop and the skeptic Walter Shandy—and so becomes not a vehicle of moral and religious instruction in itself but a sounding board for the opinions of the auditors and thus an exhibition of their characters. The mode of presentation of the sermon does not undercut the seriousness of the point which Sterne *in propria persona* made in the pulpit nearly a decade before, but it illustrates the difficulties attending such instruction, owing to the difficulties of language and the vagaries of human beings, all of whom resemble Tristram’s father to some degree or other in idiosyncratic reductiveness: “Mr. *Shandy*, my father, Sir, would see nothing in the light in which others placed it;—he placed things in his own light” (p. 109). Thus the epigraph to volume III is an adaptation by Sterne from John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, John of Salisbury declaring that it “has always been my intention to pass from frivolities to worthy and serious matters,” and Sterne transposing the scholastic philosopher’s Latin as follows: “fuit propositi semper, a jocis ad seria, a seriis, vicissim ad jocos transire”: “It has always been my intention to pass from jests to serious matters and from the serious back again to jests.”<sup>7</sup> The fact is that here as elsewhere in *Tristram Shandy* serious matters are treated with levity by the nar-

<sup>6</sup> John Traugott, in *Tristram Shandy’s World* (Berkeley, California, 1954), says much to the point in an extended and learned analysis of the relationship of Locke and Sterne. “By burlesquing and subverting the philosophical assumptions of Locke, who believed wit to be a positive evil, Sterne protests the moral value of wit” (p. xv). But Traugott likes to think of *Tristram Shandy* as rhetorical rather than novelistic, and finally judges it as Sterne’s effort to persuade the reader of the validity of his “history of the mind” (p. xvi). By this reading *Tristram Shandy* is a kind of sermon: “Sterne would have had to be even odder than he was, could he have forgotten so suddenly the habit of his office of preacher” (p. 150).

<sup>7</sup> See Ian Watt’s note on translations on the title page as reproduced in his edition, p. 117.

rator, and jests with gravity by some at least of the characters. Such is the true Shandean mixture, and flavor. Uncle Toby is preoccupied with his military campaigns, Dr. Slop with medical inanities, Trim with love, and Walter Shandy with—noses. The amusement is that the connection between them, the sexual connection, is made only by Tristram and the reader.

While evidently empty conjecture follows equally pointless speculation the real business of life goes on. And when all the characters are employed or asleep Tristram writes the Author's Preface, a partly lewd attack upon Sterne's critics, a wholly spirited defense of the Shandean method of wittily unsystematic narrative:

*I hate set dissertations,—and above all things in the world, it is one of the silliest things in one of them, to darken your hypothesis by placing a number of tall, opaque words, one before another, in a right line, betwixt your own and your readers conception,—when in all likelihood, if you had looked about, you might have seen something standing, or hanging up, which would have cleared the point at once. (p. 148)*

And surely it is to underscore the nature of the difficulties that Sterne chooses the device of the marbled pages, the black pages, the blank pages, and the omitted pages—all of which offer ocular proof of the ends to which he as an author is driven when the limits of language have been reached.

The learned disquisition on noses is preceded by the solemn declaration that "by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more or less" (p. 162). Such, certainly, is one of the most overtly disingenuous remarks to appear in the whole of *Tristram Shandy*, surrounded as it is by the blatant demands that the word be taken in its sexually symbolic sense, as it is in Rabelais, whom the narrator calls as a witness in the course of his disquisition. For Tristram turns to Slawkenbergius's tale, and that is a Rabelaisian fable—an anatomy, as Northrop Frye would call it, within an anatomy, a narrative of phallic grossness told by a man whose very name means "chamber pot of excrement." As told it is solemnly about a man with an extraordinary nose; as comprehended it is a satire on the romance—complete with incredible events, credulous and incredulous characters, and coincidences of such magnitude that they are taken entirely for granted. Arrived in Strasburg, the hero has been "at the promontory of noses; and have got me one of the goodliest and jolliest, thank heaven, that ever fell to a single man's lot" (p. 187). Every page insists on the sexual allusion, so strongly that it is almost out of the question to consider the tale to be prurient. It is, at nearly every point, openly bawdy. For Slawkenbergius's tale is more than a satire of the romance: it is also a satire of scholastic modes of argumentation, and—more broadly—an attack upon logic itself. The tale ends with the return of Diego, the hero with the long nose, to Spain and his Julia; and with the consequent disappointment of the Strasburgers who have awaited with hectic frenzy the return of the young man. "Trade and manufactures have decayed and gradually grown down ever since—but not from any cause which commercial needs have assigned; for it is owing to

this only, that Noses have ever so run in their heads, that the *Strasburgers* could not follow their business" (p. 203). Slawkenbergius's tale is a demonstration that sexual imperatives color even the most severely rational facades of human nature—and that human nature is indefeasibly physical.

Equally forceful, and to the same purpose, is the treatment of the subject of whiskers. The word whisker, Tristram says, "in course became indecent, and (after a few efforts) absolutely unfit for use" (p. 263). It is tempting to come to the gloomy conclusion that what has happened to this word is symptomatic of the corruption of language generally. But such would be a conclusion exterior to the world which Sterne calls into being in his novel. An account of the matter more consonant with the festive and at the same time shrewdly clarifying intent of the work is that the use and misuse of language give evidence of the reduction of human motive to primordial elements—of which the compelling facts of sexuality stand out sharply. Language is not merely a cloak of concupiscence but a more or less elaborate mask of false modesty, a prime example—though an example only—of the disguises with which human beings deceive themselves and try to deceive each other.

*Does not all the world know . . . that Noses ran the same fate some centuries ago in most parts of Europe, which whiskers have now done in the kingdom of Navarre—the evil indeed spread no further then—, but have not beds and bolsters, and night-caps and chamber-pots stood upon the brink of destruction ever since? Are not trowse, and placket-holes, and pump-handles—and spigots and faucets, in danger still, from the same association?— Chastity, by nature the gentlest of all affections—give it but its head—'tis like a rampaging and a roaring lion. (p. 263)*

Such a passage must do more than make us wish for a pure language. It makes us delight in Sterne's own sportive approach to questions of human intercourse.

Even death, though it has indeed some sting, is transfigured by Sterne—without, however, becoming a jest itself. The news of Bobby's demise affects the inhabitants of Shandy-Hall variously—from Susannah, who hopes to acquire certain of her mistress's garments when the lady goes into mourning, to Walter Shandy, who summons up all the wise saws in his amply-stored memory on the subject of death. "Philosophy has a fine saying for every thing. —For *Death* it has an entire set; the misery was, they all at once rushed into my father's head, that 'twas difficult to string them together, so as to make any thing of a consistent show out of them. —He took them as they came" (p. 267). Inevitably this topic leads up to or back to sex: the climactic account of death is contained in a small but conclusive chapter, in which Walter Shandy recollects that Cornelius Gallus died in the act of love. So much is indicated by asterisks. "And if it was with his wife, said my uncle *Toby*—there could be no hurt in it. —That's more than I know—replied my father" (p. 270).

The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy are advanced by way of Squire Shandy's views on education set forth in his *Tristra-paedia*, an effort of the pen

that does not come easily to him, perhaps because the document will provide the last chance for his surviving son and heir already endangered by "geniture, nose, and name" (p. 281). Typically, and hilariously, the educational program is laid out in the *Tristra-paedia* at a pace which precludes its being of value in bringing up Tristram: "the misfortune was, that I was at that time totally neglected and abandoned to my mother; and what was almost as bad, by the very delay, the first part of the work, upon which my father had spent the most of his pains, was rendered entirely useless, —every day a page or two became of no consequence" (pp. 283, 284).

The misadventures might stop here—but instead there comes the most dangerous one of them all, the circumcision of Tristram by the window-sash whose lead weights were removed by Trim to make wheels for one of the carriages on Uncle Toby's bowling green. Thus every one is implicated except Walter Shandy in the near-emasculatation of the heir of the house. This circumstance elicits expressions of sorrow and learned or at least pedantic disquisitions on the religious and medical aspects of circumcision—concluding with a return to the *Tristra-paedia*, and the exposition of Walter Shandy's linguistic theory. His view of the purpose of auxiliary verbs perfectly accords with his not fully articulated notion that language exists for the object not of communication or of formulation but of entertainment: "Now the use of the *Auxiliaries* is, at once to set the soul a going by itself upon the materials as they are brought her; and by the versability of this great engine, round which they are twisted, to open new tracks of enquiry, and make every idea engender millions" (p. 306).

If "The Story of Le Fever" were merely told, it would be a sentimental interpolated tale of the most ordinary sort; if the responses of the auditors were simply retailed, the connective tissue to the main narrative would be amply precedented. But Le Fever's story is in itself almost non-existent. Its beginning and catastrophe are related in a single sentence: "I was the ensign at *Breda*, whose wife was most unfortunately killed with a musket shot, as she lay in my arms in my tent" (p. 321). Now, much later, on his deathbed, he becomes the object of Uncle Toby's charitable concern; and Le Fever's son, after the father's death, is looked after, sent to school, and supported by Uncle Toby. The story of Le Fever in fact is really the story of Uncle Toby's sentimental generosity, and it is connected to the principal narrative in that the son, Billy Le Fever, is commended by Toby to Walter Shandy as governor to Tristram. But what makes the series of parentheses that make up Le Fever's story so Shandean is its combination of sentiment, bawdy, and comedy. Le Fever's position when his wife was killed is made enough of so that it cannot be passed over without considering its sexual context; and, even more important, the very moment of Le Fever's death is rendered with the sort of high frivolity which is Sterne's hallmark:

*The blood and spirits of Le Fever, which were waxing cold and slow within him, and were retreating to their last citadel, the heart,—rallied back,—the film forsook his eyes for a moment,—he looked up wishfully in my uncle*

Toby's face,—then cast a look upon his boy,—and that ligament, fine as it was,—was never broken.

Nature instantly ebb'd again,—the film returned to its place,—the pulse fluttered—stopp'd—went on—throb'd—stopp'd again—moved—stopp'd—shall I go on?—No. (p. 324)

This mood is sustained, though at a less exalted pitch, through the account of Yorick's funeral sermon, in the margin of which the parson praised himself by writing the word "Bravo" though later modestly overstriking this word.

Toward the end of *Tristram Shandy* the jokes begin to pall, and the repetitions, the digressions, the circularities lose the force of novelty. It is all very well to be told that Tristram's method of beginning a book is the most religious— "for I begin with writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second" (p. 415)—but the declaration of independence, of freedom from stultifying responsibility, is no longer so fresh and poignant as at the beginning of the novel. As Virginia Woolf says, "the truth is that we cannot live happily in such a fine air for long, and we begin to become conscious of limitations."<sup>8</sup> It is no doubt true that *Tristram Shandy* represents an extreme development of the picaresque structure, or of that aspect of picaresque epistemology which demands not determinate conclusion but indeterminate breaking off; but the artistic risks are such that they can be overcome only in a work of such brevity that fatigue does not set in. *Lazarillo de Tormes* is an example of such economy. Sterne learned much from Cervantes, or at least he read *Don Quixote* with pleasure, but the conclusion of that greatest of all novels is so finely wrought and in fact worked out that *Don Quixote* cannot be considered picaresque. To be sure, Mann's *Felix Krull* ends inconclusively, on a note of comic expectancy—that the more it changes, the more it will continue to be the same thing—but Mann's strong narrative sense superimposed itself on the picaresque structure and made a fine joke of the apparatus itself.

Still, the story of Uncle Toby's courtship of the Widow Wadman is good matter to be dealt with in the final sections of *Tristram Shandy*, for the impotent and innocent old soldier's inconclusive and indeed mistaken feeling for the woman is sexually and linguistically emblematic of the circularity of the novel itself. But in volume VIII the heart of the matter is alluded to without being got at directly. Enough about the Widow Wadman is related to make clear the fact that, her designs being sexual, her curiosity about Uncle Toby's wound must be assuaged before she can proceed with the match. Trim's much interrupted and never completed story of the King of Bohemia and his seven castles goes on too long, but provides opportunity for Trim to give his master some education on sexual matters, by way of telling the captain of the Beguine who cured him when he

<sup>8</sup> "Sterne," *Times Literary Supplement*, August 12, 1909 (reprinted in *Granite and Rainbow* [London, 1958], p. 172).

was wounded on the knee. The physiological aspects of love are dealt with very directly by Trim, who—however—does not succeed in making his master understand what is involved in sexual congress, even after the lesson is repeated when Trim tells of his brother's assistance in making sausages with the widow of Lisbon. For Uncle Toby imagines that a burst blister on his posterior is evidence of his being in love with the widow, when in fact it is only the result of riding his horse too briskly.

*I wish I may but manage it right; said my uncle Toby—but I declare, Corporal I had rather march up to the very edge of a trench—*

*—A woman is quite a different thing—said the corporal.*

*—I suppose so, quoth my uncle Toby. (p. 449)*

But he does not learn the difference until, in glorious rig and followed by Trim wearing his montero-cap and Lieutenant Le Fever's jacket, he makes his effort. It comes to nothing. After the corporal has been required to tell Uncle Toby in so many words the nature of the Widow Wadman's anxiety, the captain responds by saying, "Let us go to my brother Shandy's" (p. 493). There, in the final chapter, are delineated once again the gallery of solitary characters<sup>9</sup> whose inability to understand one another is exemplified in the mystifying account of the parish bull—provided by Squire Shandy himself—who cannot succeed at the only task he is intended to perform. Failure is therefore the last word in the story of *Tristram Shandy*, but the matter is put farcically, and it rests upon the substratum of sympathy that exists among the characters throughout the novel. The cock-and-bull story, a story within a story, establishes the necessary distance from which we can view the proceedings, reminding us that *Tristram Shandy* is a performance.<sup>10</sup> Mirth attends it. Mirth, in fact, is its reason for being and even condition of being. In this way the novel offers true Shandean redemption, that of an art which dares to tell the truth, of isolation made tolerable by laughter and ransomed by compassion.

<sup>9</sup> V. S. Pritchett makes this excellent point in his essay on *Tristram Shandy* in *Books in General* (New York, n.d.), p. 175.

<sup>10</sup> In a fine comparison of Ionesco and Sterne, Martin Price makes the following point, with which I entirely agree: "Sterne brings to the surface the inherent ludicrousness of all schemes of ordering. . . . As author he enacts the confused state in which he finds man. But like any good actor he remains in fact detached from his role and in control of his audience. He insists upon the fact of his performance; and the histrionic becomes the guarantee of sanity and the recovery of the natural."—*To the Palace of Wisdom* (New York, 1964), p. 341.