
Tristram Shandy and the Reader's Imagination

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Tristram Shandy and the Reader's Imagination

VERY EARLY in *Tristram Shandy*, after allowing a little time for his narrative method to intrigue and irritate his reader, the narrator pauses, ostensibly to beg our indulgence, and, in fact, to offer us some useful advice:

In the beginning of the last chapter, I inform'd you exactly *when* I was born;——but I did not inform you, *how*. *No*; that particular was reserved entirely for a chapter by itself;——besides, Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into too many circumstances relating to myself all at once.——You must have a little patience. . . . As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship.——*O diem præclarum!*——then nothing which has touched me will be thought trifling in its nature, or tedious in its telling. Therefore, my dear friend and companion, if you should think me somewhat sparing of my narrative on my first setting out,——bear with me,——and let me go on, and tell my story my own way:——or if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road,——or should sometime put on a fool's cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along,——don't fly off,——but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside;——and as we jog on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do any thing,——only keep your temper.¹

The rhetoric is alienating and seductive: we are at once put on guard and disarmed by Tristram's unexpected consciousness of our dawning criticism of his blatantly arbitrary narrative method (or, alternatively, by this sign that he is himself more aware than we had been of that very arbitrariness); we are both put off and attracted by the prospect of intimacy with a person of such perception. And we know too much of seduction to be entirely willing to place trust in a person who is so knowing about our responses and, at the same time, so suavely determined to follow his own intentions in spite of them.

Willingly or grudgingly, fully or partially, trust

him we must—not only because we must otherwise close the book; but also because he has demonstrated a larger conception of our mutual situation than the narrow literary one we have, implicitly, been entertaining. He has suggested a way of looking at our relationship that hadn't occurred to us and which is yet plainly appropriate—he has shown that he can teach us, that his approach to this experience is freer than our own. Thus, almost at once, Tristram Shandy begins to make us aware of reductive limits that our imaginations have imposed upon a new experience. He makes us doubt the adequacy of our own imaginations to comprehend and assess accurately what is happening before our eyes. And, throughout the book, he insists, frequently and variously, that such doubt makes us dependent on *him*. He may do it with polite condescension, as here, or with despairing condescension, as when he remarks of the causes of his window-sash circumcision that “It is in vain to leave this to the Reader's imagination” (p. 377); or with arrogant condescension, as when he concludes his first volume with, “I set no small store by myself upon this very account, that my reader has never yet been able to guess at any thing. And in this, Sir, I am of so nice and singular a humour that if I thought you was able to form the least judgment or probable conjecture to yourself, of what was to come in the next page,——I would tear it out of my book” (p. 80). Condescending as such comments inevitably seem, they are as inevitably literally true.

Our response to these comments may be complicated, however, and our annoyance deepened, by the fact that they are interspersed among many contrivances that make it impossible for us not to try to guess. This is not one of those friendships in which our companion takes it as part of his duty to make perfectly clear in advance just what we are to make of any given proposal or event; on the contrary, it is apparent from the start that we are expected to do our share. In a famous passage, Tristram says that, as “Writing, when properly

managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all;—so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own" (pp. 108–09). Well before this agreeable division of responsibility, but after reprimanding his female readers for their careless reading habits, he has explicitly set forth his hope that "all good people, both male and female, . . . may be taught to think as well as read" (p. 57).

By such apparently contradictory signs it is quickly established that Tristram has set out to educate and train our imaginations, rather than allow us the simpler pleasures of giving free rein to our own conceptions or passively relying on his. He holds out the prospect (though not the promise) of some rewards if we do in fact show ourselves capable of something more than reading "in quest of adventures" (p. 56); we may at least hope that the author won't be in a position to laugh at us as often as he has done. The primary device of his method of instruction is to make us doubt the imaginative faculties that we have relied on to carry us through this narrative (as they've done through many others), and also to make us see that we are dominated by preconceptions that are inadequate for a full interpretation of the unfamiliar circumstances that we find ourselves in.

The episodes that Tristram recounts in his own life and in those of his relatives and acquaintances characteristically dramatize confrontations between expectation and realization in which the former is constantly disappointed: Walter Shandy's efforts to control the circumstances of his son's life through an auspicious parturition and christening, Toby's naïve assumptions about the nature of Mrs. Wadman's interest in his health, are only among the best-known instances in a continuing series of events designed to show that life, and specifically other men and women defy human assumptions about them. These repeated examples warn the wary, but as is immedi-

ately apparent to the reader of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne is not content with the possibility that his reader will fully comprehend the follies and dangers attendant on applying old generalizations to new specifics merely through observation of examples. Personal experience is a surer teacher, and he makes certain that we will have sufficient instances of our own imaginative failures to supplement the lessons of the Shandean household.

His means for making us confront ourselves are very numerous, but I will center on the three that I have found most important. Most frequently, we cannot resist judging situations ourselves that are under analysis by characters in the novel and, as a result, we find our own deluded prejudices laid bare by the very processes that uncover theirs. Thus when we are shown the folly of their interpretation, we laugh at ourselves while we laugh at the fools and knaves in the world of the novel. Second, we are made to participate in the double meanings of words, with the effect that we find ourselves reading meanings, often unflattering ones, into situations where such meanings may be entirely mistaken. And finally, from the very first page of the novel, Sterne repeatedly manipulates us by deliberately disappointing expectations of narrative form which we have developed through our prior reading. By arbitrarily departing from conventions of customary narrative form in the epic, the novel, and the romance, Sterne insists that arbitrariness lies in the conventions themselves and that our allegiance to them is a sign of a preference for convenient artifice over inconvenient reality. Through each of these techniques, Sterne leads the reader to look first at himself so that when the reader confronts others his vision will distort less radically what he sees. By these various means Sterne leads us particularly to understand that the causes of human events are richer and more complex—more fully human—than we typically assume.

II

To begin—as the book does—with the last of these methods: Sterne is seldom willing to make his literary innovations quietly. Plunging into the opening contemplation upon his conception, he first of all ensures that the reader will find his method eccentric even to the point of aberration. But no sooner have we confidently decided that we are dealing with a mad literary *ingénu* than

he pauses to point out what he has done by placing it in the context of traditional literary openings and drawing attention precisely to the intentional artfulness of his approach. Conjuring up the shade of no less than the greatest Roman critic, he remarks that he has "begun the history of myself . . . as *Horace* says, *ab Ovo*" (p. 7). Thus enters, it would seem, the highest possible literary authority to vouch for the validity, the timeless truth, upon which this history is founded. But of course that isn't the case at all: "I know," he continues, that *Horace* "does not recommend this fashion [of opening a narrative] altogether." And indeed *Horace* does not: in the passage that *Tristram* alludes to, *Horace* commends *Homer* for starting the *Iliad* *in medias res* rather than going back, as he might have done, to its remoter cause in the emergence of *Helen* from the egg. But the apparently crackbrained use of authority accomplishes several purposes. It makes us doubt our first assumption that *Tristram* is entirely without literary sophistication. More important, it makes us aware that *where* a writer begins his story is a matter of choice and should depend upon his calculation of the most important causes of the story he is going to tell, not upon some universally recognized causes having their origins in a small set of universally recognized points of departure. In the perspective thus established, *Tristram's* opening is no more arbitrary than *Homer's*, which, he suggests, may be appropriate to an epic poem or a tragedy (p. 8). However, since he is writing neither one nor the other, he decides to ignore *Horace* altogether: "in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man's rules that ever lived" (p. 8).

By this time the reader should feel sufficiently uncomfortable about his original doubts of *Tristram's* literary control. His opening is surely less arbitrary than our judgment of it has been, for he has at least thought of it in relation to the particular story he is going to tell, while we have judged it on preconceptions gathered from other books. His choice has been more conscious and considered than our judgment of it. If it remains arbitrary, it is arbitrariness with a difference: with the suggestion, in short, that all attempts to trace causes may end, where *Tristram* begins, with a pathetic, ludicrous, but valiant effort to describe the ineffable. In any case, it is the need for such

conscious consideration of the relation between generalities and particulars that he is determined to instill in us. He has chosen to begin his story at a remote and uncommon point; now that he has given us an idea of his reasons for doing so, he will go on with further details. But the reader must make up his own mind whether to follow him: "To such . . . as do not choose to go so far back into these things, I can give no better advice, than that they skip over the remaining part of this Chapter; for I declare before hand, 'tis wrote only for the curious and inquisitive" (p. 8). Whether we now choose to ignore our narrator's obvious preference depends on whether we believe that the manner and time of a man's conception may in fact make an important contribution to his history. Or at least, he has given us the option of so choosing.

One further point should be made about this initial embarrassment of the reader through the literary preconceptions that he brings to *Tristram Shandy* before I go on to consider another instance in which the narrator expands upon and consolidates his victories along this line. *Tristram's* opening lesson is characteristic in that it does not so much reveal a new truth to the reader, as force him to be conscious of what he has known all along but forgets under the pressure of certain situations. To phrase the point that *Tristram* brings up here as I did when I said that we must decide whether it is possible that the manner and time of a man's conception may in fact make an important contribution to his history makes it obvious that he is getting us to acknowledge a truth that was hidden only by the unique and unexpected way that *Tristram* asserted it in his eccentric opening chapter. Thus typically it is because we are startled and defensive that we are disinclined to apply our own *experience* to a situation and resort instead to formulaic preconceived *ideas* to provide our judgments of the significance of events in this novel.

Among the many other ways in which *Sterne* assaults our preconceptions about what a narrative should be, and thereby gets us to reconsider what a narrative (and a life) *is*, his digressions into stories apparently unrelated to his history are the most noticeable and the most important to his purposes. In one sense, the very title of the book provides justification for any amount of deviation from the norms of narrative: if you are telling the

story of your opinions as well as of your life, what authorization beyond its existence is required for the inclusion of any idea in your book? How can anything be digressive? But if Sterne's title, like his self-consciousness about his way of starting the novel, amounts to a helpful assertion of purpose, the value of the purpose nevertheless remains to be tested. If we evaluate the coherence of Tristram's narrative on the basis of apparent similarities to familiar narratives, we are certain to be embarrassed.

Sterne does all he can to ensure that we will be. Throughout the first volume he builds our conventional impatience to have the hero born and teases us with his digressive interruptions. Our hopes are foiled by the story of Yorick and the midwife, and by a copy of a learned pronouncement from the Sorbonne, by a facsimile of the Shandys' marriage contract, and by the beginning of the description of Uncle Toby's character, which in turn is interrupted by the story of Aunt Dinah and the coachman. And as we near the end of the volume with Tristram still in the womb, the story is stopped again by his bland pronouncement that these digressions "incontestibly, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading;—take them out of this book . . . you might as well take the book along with them;—one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer;—he steps forth like a bridegroom,——bids All hail; brings in variety, and forbids the appetite to fail" (p. 73).

This assured mockery of the reader's impulse to have him get on with the central narrative line results in part from reasons that he has set forth just prior to this rhapsody on his own artistry. Worried that no one has noticed his unprecedented accomplishment, he begins the chapter by asserting that he must commend himself for his digressive skill, "the merit of which has all along, I fear, been overlooked by my reader,——not for want of penetration in him,——but because 'tis an excellence seldom looked for, or expected indeed, in a digression;——and it is this: That tho' my digressions are all fair, as you observe,——and that I fly off from what I am about, as far and as often too as any writer in *Great-Britain*; yet I constantly take care to order affairs so, that my main business does not stand still in my absence" (p. 72). Such claims, like the jaunty assurance of his early remarks about Horace, demand investigation, and

this time we are far enough along in the book to use past evidence. When we look back at his title and at the long chain of digressions, we find that they do indeed bear directly though esoterically upon the conditions of his birth and, presumably, upon the formation of his opinions.

Tristram makes us aware, then, that, as Henry James was to say, "really, universally, relations stop nowhere," and he shows us that our assumption that the really important part of his history will start only when he gets out into the world is naïve and simplistic. Much of what he is to be is decided by what other people said and did long before he was born, so that the digressions which had seemed peripheral *do* further the main business of the work. But this effect in turn has a further result: given such an endless chain of causes, it becomes apparent that how he chooses to see them is as important as the fact that he sees them at all. If all such remote determinants are important, then all are meaningless—except as the narrator chooses to invest them with significance. Tristram's digressions, many of which dramatize the reasons why he has been "the continual sport of what the world calls fortune" and why that "ungracious Duchess has pelted me with a set of as pitiful misadventures and cross accidents as ever small HERO sustained" (p. 10), are nonetheless "the sunshine of this book," because he chooses to turn his misfortunes into high comic art.

This conclusion is made inescapable not only by our observation of Tristram's characteristically high-spirited response to his misfortunes and infirmities, but by those of the admirable characters whose careers he traces within the digressions. To consider only those that precede his boast about his digressive skill: the episode concerning Yorick shows him making a joke of the vicious hostility of his colleagues even when it has brought him to his deathbed; and the story of Aunt Dinah and the coachman, which Walter can never resist telling despite the pain it causes his brother, in time elicits only a song from Toby—he responds to it by whistling *Lillabulero*. The reader accustomed to the straightforward causes and effects of an "adventure" discovers that Tristram Shandy is subtly influenced not only by past actions but by past example as well: like Yorick and Toby, he turns unavoidable misfortune to his own imaginative uses. And, incidentally, in so doing, this "small hero" finds the same consolation

for his woes that Alcinous in the eighth book of the *Odyssey* proposes to that greater hero: "That was all gods' work, weaving ruin there / so it should make a song for men to come."²

To move to the second of Sterne's devices for making us self-conscious, I will turn now from his education of his reader's imagination by disappointing and so instructing our narrative expectations to what I will call his parables of pre-conception. A great deal of the humor and meaning of the novel depends, of course, upon the creation of situations in which people misinterpret actions or talk because their responses are determined by dominant preexisting ideas rather than by attention to the specifics of the situation itself. Sterne distinguishes harmless hobbyhorses, which may prevent accurate comprehension of a situation but which cause no further harm, from the more self-interested predispositions which insist upon interpreting everything to someone else's disadvantage. But both kinds of episodes work to keep the reader alert to the perils involved in properly interpreting external signs. For example, when Walter Shandy assumes that Corporal Trim doesn't understand the real meaning of his catechism because he rolls off the commandments as if they were military orders, he proceeds to construct a hypothesis about the differences between science and wisdom on the basis of his assumption. But when Trim aptly and touchingly glosses the fourth commandment as allowing your mother and father three halfpence a day out of your pay, when they grow old (p. 393), it is *Walter's* mind that is shown to be mechanical, and he is for once effectively, if temporarily, silenced.

Such an episode certainly warns the reader to be careful about his approach to the situation he is himself involved in: we had better not assume that because Tristram's way of expressing himself in this book appears naïve that it is so in fact. (The novel's opening, already discussed, is a case in point.) But, especially in the first part of the book, when he offers his parables of pre-conception to the reader, Tristram usually takes pains to *ensure* that we will apply them to ourselves and not sit back and smile in amused complacency at the folly of others. Like Fielding in *Tom Jones*, Sterne uses the example of false judgments of minor characters to guide the reader's judgment of his major character in the future. One extended

example will illustrate how Sterne makes it hard for us to avoid applying his parables to ourselves.

When Tristram begins to tell how Yorick came to provide a midwife for his parish, he makes us first have a look at what we assume would be likely motives for doing a woman a good turn. For my part, he says, since the parson provided the funds to set her up in business, I think he should have his share of the honor for it, but "The world at that time was pleased to determine the matter otherwise" (p. 17). The reader, not totally exempt from the world's weaknesses, at once begins to supply the lowest common denominator of dealings between men and women. And he is encouraged by Tristram: "Lay down the book, and I will allow you half a day to give a probable guess at the grounds of this procedure." Since we already assume that we know, we proceed at once to have our suspicions apparently confirmed by the information that the world's judgment resulted from the parson's having "made himself a country-talk by a breach of all decorum, which he had committed against himself, his station, and his office." And thus our assumptions trap us, and the need to rely on the narrator's fuller knowledge is confirmed, for it turns out that the breach of decorum that leads the public to be disinclined to honor Yorick for his good deed to the midwife is in fact merely his having chosen some years since to provide himself with a poorer horse than his parishioners consider appropriate to one of his station.

That is the first turn of the screw. With our own unworthy predisposition to think the worst fully exposed, Tristram next begins to build the parable of the parishioners' preconceptions. Yorick's delicacy and tact, his modesty and self-effacement, his patience and good humor, and, above all, his willingness to be laughed at, all emerge from an account of how, though "In the language of the county, where he dwelt, he was said to have loved a good horse" (p. 20), he came to prefer a poor one. Yorick's neighbors, it seems, were always borrowing his fast horses and riding them to death on one or another errand; buying new ones was ruining him. Rather than hurt their feelings by keeping the horses to himself, he chose to jog along on the equivalent of Don Quixote's Rosinante.

And rather than ascribe his choice correctly to delicacy and tact, the world preferred to ex-

plain his change of style as a ludicrous eccentricity—until the moment that he set the midwife up in business in his parish. Then the memory of their most common reason for borrowing the horses—to ride to the next town for medical aid—rushed back into their minds in time to provide a selfish motive for Yorick's action: "The parson had a returning fit of pride which had just seized him; and he was going to be well mounted once again in his life" (p. 22). Thus Tristram presents as the moral of the story the human predilection to think the worst of others whenever possible. And it would seem that with the example of ourselves and Yorick's parishioners before us, we would have sufficient lesson to ponder.

But Tristram at once prepares the third turn of the screw, whereby we are implicated in the same motive, as we had been in the same impulse, that characterized Yorick's hostile neighbors. In the two following chapters their hostility is seen to spring specifically from the parson's habit of "unwary pleasantry," his frankness, and his willingness to turn anything to a joke, "without much distinction of either personage, time, or place" (pp. 27–28). And so it develops that "tho' he never sought, yet, at the same time, as he seldom shun'd occasions of saying what came uppermost, and without much ceremony;—he had but too many temptations in life, of scattering his wit and his humour,——his gibes and his jests about him.——They were not lost for want of gathering." In short, his good humor and freedom make him enemies, and no one who has been the object of his wit ever forgets it. Turning to the reader, Tristram calls on us to judge for ourselves what the result would be: "As the reader (for I hate your *ifs*) has a thorough knowledge of human nature, I need not say more to satisfy him, that my Hero could not go on at this rate without some slight experience of these incidental mementos." Having made clear Yorick's generosity toward his parishioners first in loaning them his horses and then in providing them with a midwife, he has provided us with an example of demonstrably good intentions that are willfully misconstrued by people who can't bear occasionally to be laughed at: Yorick's friend Eugenius makes it explicit when he says that "I cannot suspect it in the man whom I esteem, that there is the least spur from spleen or malevolence of intent in these sallies.——I believe and know them to be truly

honest and sportive:——But consider, my dear lad, that fools cannot distinguish this,——and that knaves will not; and thou knowest not what it is, either to provoke the one, or to make merry with the other,——whenever they associate for mutual defence, depend upon it, they will carry on the war in such a manner against thee, my dear friend, as to make thee heartily sick of it, and of thy life too" (p. 29).

The reader who by this time fails to sense that he has again fallen into a trap must be very willing indeed to be called by the former of Eugenius' epithets. From the beginning of the book we have been the objects of Tristram's humor, and therefore we stand in the position of Yorick's neighbors; and, like them, we too have doubtless been a little annoyed and insulted by gibes and jests. But, like Yorick, Tristram has effectively benefited us even while he was making jokes at our expense; thus we must be as foolish or as vicious as Yorick's parishioners if we don't comprehend the generous motive behind his honest sportiveness. At every step in this parable the reader is shown the inevitable folly and the possible vice of judging on preconceptions, and, in the last part of it, the danger of allowing injured vanity to prevail over a recognition of generous motives and beneficial actions. Patient and clear-sighted observation of his actions reveals Yorick to be eminently trustworthy; Tristram's enthusiastic approval of that example carries the clear suggestion that the reader may expect comparable benefits, along with gibes and jests, from his association with Tristram, if our patience and trust can prevail over our laziness, skepticism, and humorlessness.

The third important method that Sterne uses to make the reader aware of his common preconceptions, and the dangers of adhering to them without examination, may be the most memorable—at least to those who have tossed the book into a corner and refused to pick it up again. His double-entendre may indeed seem, in the words of F. R. Leavis' confident dismissal of *Tristram Shandy* from the great tradition of the English novel, "irresponsible (and nasty) trifling."³ (What would we do without Leavis' convenient remark as a departure point in *Tristram Shandy* criticism?) But to readers who believe that "through imaginative play we learn about ourselves,"⁴ Tristram's *noses* and *whiskers* define the rules of the games

we play with ourselves in place of communicating with each other, and at the same time show how, given the inevitability of such games, we may be able to communicate both around and through them.

Once again Sterne does not teach a new truth but rather forces us to recognize the implications of something we have known all along. Of course, double-entendre exists, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder, and while Tristram may rather insistently impose certain objects to force his point, our minds would be impenetrable if they were pure. His first aim is to show us how easy it is for "little interests from below" to make us leap to conclusions on very little evidence. The leaps, we find, are inevitable: when Tristram applies the slightest pressure, our minds will supply the responses. While it is unlikely that we have been conscious of the rich possibilities of the word "nose," for example, when Trim first announces to Walter Shandy that Dr. Slop is making a bridge for Tristram's (which has been crushed "flat as a pancake to his face" by the forceps), only a little emphasis is sufficient to bring quite another appendage to mind. And once it has occurred to us, no amount of definition will stop the growth of the idea in our minds. Sterne's method here is not to make us choose which meaning we will believe but rather to force us to arrive at an impasse. Our uncertainty grows precisely in proportion to Tristram's efforts to assure us that his meaning is simple: "by the word *Nose*, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word *Nose* occurs,—I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less" (p. 218).

Thus our preconceptions lead to confusion. The alternatives offered are not between one or another interpretation of the word—we really can't know which is correct—but between remaining in uncertainty with the mind alert to further clues, or giving up, and, if we are consistent, closing the book. If we have by this time learned to be patient and to rely on Tristram to do his best to reward that virtue, we will be offered some help by later events. The window sash that falls some years later, for example, may help us in this case to be more certain that Tristram meant just what he said: a circumcision could scarcely have taken place otherwise.

Though such efforts are vital to our comprehen-

sion of Tristram's story, here (as in the case of the digressions) the ultimate effect of our initial confusion is the revelation of quite another kind of meaning, an effect that goes beyond the instruction in how to arrive at denotations more accurately. The decision to suspend judgment when we have no real grounds for a decision results in a considerable freedom: we need no longer act as automata imposing simplistic systems upon the world and mankind. From that result emerges the further awareness that our ambiguous responses to language represent a complexity in our response to things. The fusion between objects of our perception that Tristram makes us so unforgettably conscious of in his double-entendre originates in our sensuous perception of things, not in the words themselves. And Tristram's knowing manipulation of our responses is intended not only to arouse our fantasies but to make us certain that he shares our sense of this fusion just as we share his.

These associative fusions of things in our minds through the similarities of some of their characteristics deprive language of denotative simplicity, but at the same time endow it with a symbolism of supreme expressive power. Sterne's double-entendres amount, then, to a primer in poetry, initiating the naïve reader into the principles of the symbolism which is essential to his effort to communicate with us in *Tristram Shandy*. It is the ability to recognize and make use of this fusion of the mind and the senses that Sterne's double meanings begin to teach the reader. Out of the muddle of preconceptions which inevitably enter the mind through the senses, we may, with insight, devise a means of expressing, though not finally a means of controlling, some of the infinite ambiguity of life. It is in this limited but very real freedom that Sterne begins to instruct his reader when he first goads him into thinking about the meanings of the word *nose*.

III

When he denied that his book was "wrote against predestination, or free will," claiming instead that "If 'tis wrote against any thing,—'tis wrote, an' please your worships, against the spleen; in order, by a more frequent and a more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostal and abdominal muscles in laughter, to drive the *gall* and other *bitter juices* from the gall bladder,

liver and sweet-bread of his majesty's subjects, with all the inimicitious passions which belong to them, down into their duodenums" (pp. 301–02), Sterne was stating the truth literally. Tristram Shandy makes every possible effort to persuade his reader to be good-tempered, but in so doing he is also proving, if my reading is correct, the existence of both predestination and free will as causes of human events. For him, true good temper requires the patience to accept things and human beings as they are and to find in them sources of joy to compensate for the misfortunes imposed by "one of the vilest worlds that ever was made" (p. 10). Thus when good temper exists it makes possible precisely an escape from the universally predetermined painful brevity of life, a chance to transform suffering itself, as we have seen, into humor, and the irrevocable physicality of human nature into poetry.

Good temper, then, is the attribute that makes individual freedom possible. Through it, the determined destructive causes of what happens to us may be subordinated to the vital creative forces that *are* in our control. "Are we for ever," asks Tristram, "to be twisting, and untwisting the same rope? for ever in the same track—for ever at the same pace? Shall we be destined to the days of eternity, on holy-days, as well as working-days, to be shewing the *relics of learning*, as monks do the relics of their saints—without working one—one single miracle with them?" (p. 343). The

answer that emerges from his example and his instruction is surely clear: we are destined to remain trapped in sterile futility only if we refuse to break barriers that our minds erect between us and the world. Sterne threatens those barriers by making us laugh good-humoredly. That kind of laughter implies that we must like and, above all, trust the person who causes it; our acceptance of Tristram becomes, in fact, the sign of our acceptance of the world. For, like the world, the very ways in which Tristram is hard on the reader allows us the options of giving up in frustration, or responding with vigor and responsibility. He tests and teaches his reader. Thus the book attempts to persuade us of the necessity and the possibility of trusting this odd narrator, and this odd world, to help us understand what our unaided preconceptions inevitably find baffling in each new experience. Thus it is written, I should say, against simple individualism and self-reliance, as it is against simple predestination and free will. As Tristram Shandy twice reminds us, "We live in a world beset on all sides with mysteries and riddles" (p. 625; cf. p. 293) "*hardly do we guess aright at the things that are upon the earth*" (p. 126). But with the aid of the infuriating, condescending, and generous Tristram, *and* "with labour, do we find the things that are before us" (p. 126).

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Notes

¹ *Tristram Shandy*, ed. James A. Work (New York: Odyssey, 1940), pp. 10–11. All references are to this edition.

² Trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1963), p. 142.

³ *The Great Tradition* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1954), p. 11, n. 2.

⁴ Ian Watt, Introd. to *Tristram Shandy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. xxxv.