



The Comic as a Critique of Reason: Tristram Shandy

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Receuil, Schapiro notes that his entries "speak of the fascination of the image . . . and the artist's wonderful skill, often in complete abstraction from the content of the object of art." (p. 138) And, in summarizing another medieval text, Schapiro notes "the love of light and fine fenestration . . . the deliberate planning of views in buildings and gardens for the eyes' delight" manifest by its author. (p. 140)

The relevance of these remarks to *The Book of the Duchess* is striking. For, as we have seen, the poem is replete with pattern and arrangement which attend upon, but are not essential to, the poem's meaning. Huppé and Robertson's "allegorical imperative" hides this feature of the *Book*: Schapiro's account of "the fascination of the image" and the "deliberate planning of views" justly describes it. The three planes of Chaucer's poem have no paraphrasable—or moral—impact. They merely en-

hance and refine our awareness of the poem's central figure. And the use to which the *Book* puts poetic convention is much closer to the keen sense of aesthetic distance which Schapiro detects in St. Bernard than to the theological involvement manifested by Huppé and Robertson. In *The Book of the Duchess* "instruction" cannot be divorced from "delight": the structure and metaphorical operation of the poem are, largely, its content. For the poem, as we have already seen, is chiefly a commentary on itself. The poem's three parallel tales of love and loss elucidate each other; the pivotal dialogue which is the most compelling of the three emblems of grief has no ulterior point or theological motive. Its purpose is to elucidate the resonances of the Knight's opening eleven-line complaint and to raise to its highest power the testing of convention that is at the heart of the poem as a whole.

The Comic as a Critique of Reason: *Tristram Shandy*

GEORGE GOODIN

I

THERE ARE TWO BASIC WAYS to derive a theory for the criticism of comic works. One leads toward a theory of comedy, the other toward a theory of the comic. The theorist of comedy selects a group of comedies and constructs an ideal comic plot from their common features. Since this procedure is the same as that by which Aristotle derived a theory of tragedy, the theorist may be assisted along the way by inverting Aristotle,

thus developing concepts such as comic catharsis, comic hamartia, and comic discovery. If there is little diversity among the comedies he selects, his definition will be over exclusive, and he will eventually be forced to consider those works which do not have his ideal plot as failing to be "true comedies." If there is great diversity among the comedies he selects, he may begin to doubt that there is such a thing as a comic plot. In tragedies, he may note, the order of events is relatively fixed. In many comedies, however, the episodes can be placed in an entirely different order with far less damage than the same experiment would inflict on a tragedy.

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Theories of comedy have been useful in suggesting that our idea of plot has been derived from tragedy and must be enlarged considerably to cover what goes on in comedies. They have been useful too in defining types of comedies against which we can see the individuality of those works which conform to the type. They are not useful, however, in dealing with comic elements in tragedies, tragic farces, slapstick tragedies—and whatever type of work *Tristram Shandy* is. For these, one needs a theory of the comic. And since a theory of the comic implies a theory of comedy (a work pretty much dominated by the comic), though the reverse is not the case, I wish to show a way of thinking about the comic—a way which, since it owes a great deal to Sterne, is particularly appropriate to *Tristram Shandy*. I do not wish to claim much originality for this theory. On the contrary, I hope it will recommend itself as representing in its major features a consensus which has gone largely unrecognized.

A theory of the comic is a theory of laughter, specialized for literary criticism. The usual way of developing one is to gather a group of laughable incidents and note recurrent responses to them. Presumably, if one can determine what laughter is, he should be able to see what meaning is being communicated in the comic scenes of any work. Such a theory also has its difficulties. One is that it provides no special tools for dealing with a work as a whole. Another is that it may get bogged down in psychological rather than literary questions. The first of these is a necessary consequence of the procedure. The second is not, because there is substantial agreement among theorists about the cause of laughter, and the areas of disagreement do not much matter for literary criticism. Furthermore, this theory conforms fairly well with our common sense observation of laughter. Briefly stated, it finds laughter to be caused by the

emotional relief incident to a judgment that an incongruity or disproportion which had seemed to require overt remedial action does not require such action after all. A less brief statement, admirably argued and illustrated, can be found in Arthur Koestler's *Insight and Outlook* or *The Act of Creation*.

The agreement about the cause of laughter seems to disappear when theorists try to characterize the incongruous elements in order to deal with the meaning of laughter. Some terms suggested for this purpose are as follows:

Bergson	mechanical	living
Kant	expectation	occurrence
Lipps	expectation	occurrence
	of	of
	significance	triviality
Coleridge	finite great	little
Schopenhauer	abstract	sensuous
	knowledge	knowledge
Fielding	affectation	truth
Hobbes	non-deformed	deformed
	observer	object
Freud	childhood	adult
	security	insecurity
Koestler	narrative	flash
Emerson	idea	false
		performance
Auden	universal	individual
	impersonal	personal
	angelic	finite
Lynch	things as they	things as
Hazlitt	ought to be	they are
	ideal	real
Potts	normal	abnormal
	centric	eccentric
	hypothesis	negative
	unknown	instance
Buchanan	quantity	trial value

The differences between these terms reflect the personalities, preoccupations, and philosophies of the various theorists, and they are not reconcilable. However, there are similarities, which I have used as a basis for placing the terms in two distinct columns. Most of the terms in the right-hand column characterize that

which is incongruous; most of those on the left characterize that in relation to which the incongruity exists. In other words, those in the right-hand column refer to what gets related, and those on the left refer to that to which it gets related. I regret the inelegance of doing so, but for the moment, I want to designate as "X" whatever concept results from noting the similarities within the right-hand column, even if that concept is no more than has already been indicated. "Y" can serve a similar purpose for those terms in the left-hand column. Thus we can say that the process of laughter begins with seeing something "wrong" with X, in relation to Y, which is "right," and we may diagram this $X- \overline{Y}$. This, however, is also the be-

ginning of many serious situations, in which effort is needed to make X right. Laughter results from not needing to make this effort, but deciding instead that X is already right, which is usually done by referring it to something other than Y. The only theorist I know with a term for this third element is Coleridge, who calls it the "infinite." I prefer "Z."

Thus, laughter may be seen to result from some repudiation of Y as a proper frame of reference for X, and a substitution of Z: $X- \rightarrow X+ \overline{Y} \quad \overline{Z}$. But this is not al-

ways laughable either, unless Y reasserts itself to provide two frames of reference which are, at least temporarily, contending. This phenomenon has been recognized by many theorists as "comic oscillation." Kant, for one, says, "the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence, when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation." The oscillation is between seeing X in relation to Y and seeing it in relation to Z, and this may be diagrammed

$X- \longleftrightarrow X+ \overline{Y} \quad \overline{Z}$. What we have here is a

model of laughter—that is, a description which has been refined toward the reversibility desirable of a definition. Although it may need further refining, it seems to me more useful than attempting to find a definition. If we were interested simply in laughter, there would be much more to do because this model explains primarily the relations involved rather than the content. But if something is laughed at, whether it should be or not, this model will direct us to finding three terms in the relationships indicated.

To specialize such a model into a model of the comic is to develop its possibilities with regard to the concerns of literary works and to accommodate it, as well as possible, to existing critical terms. In life the situation, $X- \rightarrow X- \overline{Y} \quad \overline{Y}$, in which the

initial judgment that something is wrong becomes confirmed, occurs frequently, but I do not know of any name for it. In literature, however, this is what happens in satire, and like its counterpart in life, it is not funny. I know of few examples, but the following uncharacteristic passage from Wordsworth is one. It is a portrait of a London preacher, in *The Prelude*.

Yet ostentation, domineering, oft
Poured forth harangues, how sadly out
of place!—
There have I seen a comely bachelor,
Fresh from a toilette of two hours,
ascend
His rostrum, with seraphic glance look
up,
And, in a tone elaborately low
Beginning, lead his voice through
many a maze
A minuet course; and, winding up his
mouth,
From time to time, into an orifice
Most delicate, a lurking eyelet, small,

And only not invisible, again
 Open it out, diffusing thence a smile
 Of rapt irradiation, exquisite. (VII,
 (549-561))

This shows how serious satire can be. If any reader finds it comic, I hope he will either take the trouble to find his own example or accept "satire" as a merely logical entity.

The non-laughable situation opposite to satire occurs when the initial judgment is reversed, and the original frame of reference is rejected, $X- \rightarrow X+$. There is

$\overline{Y} \quad \overline{Z}$

no satisfactory name for this, in literature or in life. What we now think of as sentimental conforms to this model, the appeal of Z being largely emotional. Therefore I propose to call this situation sentimental even if the appeal is intellectual. We may find an example in Tolstoy's "The Three Hermits," where there are three old, ignorant, and selfless hermits living on an island for the salvation of their souls. They have no formal religion until a bishop comes by and teaches them the Lord's Prayer. After they have painfully memorized it, the bishop sails away, only to find some time later that the hermits are running after him on the water because they have forgotten the prayer. The bishop refuses to instruct them again, saying, "It is not for me to teach you." The rhetoric of the sentimental involves establishing (1) that X is deprived or deficient (a child, a cripple, an animal, or an idiot, for example) in relation to Y , but (2) that this deficiency is more than made up for when X is judged by Z , so that X is better off than those things which measure up to Y . Frequently this elevation is accomplished through associating X with something one rung up on the ladder of being: it is really spiritual instead of physical, human instead of animal, manly instead of womanly, angelic rather than manly.

The comic may thus be thought of as arising from the contention of satiric

and sentimental frames of reference. It depends on inhibiting both the satiric and the sentimental response to situations, just as satire and sentimentality depend on inhibiting a comic response. Bergson has said that comedy requires an "anesthesia of the heart," by which he meant that the sentimental will destroy it. Apparently Sterne believed there was more danger of the comic being destroyed by a satiric response. At least it seems to me that much of the sentimentalism in *Tristram Shandy* serves to inhibit satire. Certainly the dead are usually exempt from satire, and the point of view of the novel places the narration after the deaths of all the principal characters except Tristram. Furthermore, Tristram very early gives sentimental portraits of Walter, Toby, and Yorick, in which he alludes to, or elaborates on, the death of each.

Comic oscillation, as Ramon Fernandez noted, is not a very comfortable state of mind, and cannot be prolonged indefinitely. It frequently subsides without any suggestion of a resolution—having accomplished its purpose simply by eliciting opposed frames of reference. In these cases, there is little to be gained from any critical subtlety being employed to determine tone with any precision. However, a writer may force us to see the comic subsiding into some sort of final judgment. If he does, the model above suggests four such judgments. If the satiric view is recommended as a final judgment, the result may be called comic satire. If the sentimental view is recommended, the result may be called humor. The third possibility is $X- \longleftrightarrow X+ \rightarrow$

$\overline{Y} \quad \overline{Z}$

$X-$. This is Coleridge's definition of $\overline{Z}$

humor, but I think it is better as a description of black humor, in which Z is an infinite skepticism that renders all other frames of reference—and individuals also—inconsequential. I do not think there is

as much black humor as is generally supposed, but any reader can find examples close at hand. The fourth possibility is $X- \longleftrightarrow X+ \rightarrow X+$. This is a kind of

$\bar{Y} \quad \bar{Z} \quad \bar{Y}$

comic mistake, most frequently practiced in works which are trying not to offend anyone. An example, though not from such a work, is in *Man and Superman*, in the scene in which Violet's pregnancy is discovered very quickly to be in wedlock instead of out.

In the practical criticism of the comic, regardless of whether any "final" judgment is called for, there are three main tasks. (1) Finding X. This is no problem because it either finds us, or we don't know that a comic situation exists. It is almost invariably explicit and usually particular, though it may itself be a frame of reference, being compared to other frames. (2) Finding Y. It can be found by asking what we would have to think to take a comic scene as satire. It is that frame of reference in relation to which X is deficient, absurd, nonsensical, or inconsequential. (3) Finding Z. It is usually implicit and may be found by asking what frame of reference would make some kind of sense or give some kind of importance to X. This is the most neglected task in the criticism of the comic. Unfortunately, the same problem exists here as in the interpretation of a symbol—that there may be many ways equally legitimate of elucidating it, and that any of them, or all together, will distort it. Like a symbol, Z very often gives new knowledge, but it is hard to express with anything but old knowledge.

II

The form of the comic forces it to be critical of reason, because reason, usually if not always, is "single frame" thinking, and the comic insists on more than one. This accounts for various theorists having discovered common to all comedies a "comic vision," "comic

spirit," or "comedic wisdom." But the subject matter of a comic scene may also be the operations of reason. If this is the case with many comic scenes in a work, and if the choral comment is largely concerned with mental operations, the work itself may be seen as a critique of reason. That this is the case with *Tristram Shandy* I would like to show in this section by looking at the commentary, some minor comic incidents, and the form of the novel.

The role played by reason is kept prominent throughout the novel by the comments of Tristram, whether we consider these comments as "authoritative" or not. Reason is not contemptible to him; witness the following, which E. N. Hooker showed to be a paraphrase of Swift: "When a man gives himself up to the government of a ruling passion,—or, in other words, when his HOBBY-HORSE grows head-strong,—farewell cool reason and fair discretion" (II, 5)! Nevertheless man's mind is subject to "the triumph of slight incidents" (IV, 27), and "his reason that precious gift of God to him—(instead of pouring in oyl)" serves "but to sharpen his sensibilities" (III, 21). The result is, as Tristram twice informs us, "we live amongst riddles and mysteries—the most obvious things, which come in our way, have dark sides, which the quickest sight cannot penetrate into: and even the clearest and most exalted understandings amongst us find ourselves puzzled and at a loss in almost every cranny of nature's works" (IV, 17).

That reason which Tristram does object to is systematic reasoning or philosophy. In speaking of the allegation that Yorick was responsible for rolling the hot chestnut into Phutatorius' breeches, he says it was "as groundless as the dreams of philosophy" (IV, 27). In characterizing the dispute about the stranger's long nose in Slawkenbergius' tale he says, "they concerned themselves not with facts—they reasoned" (IV). Frequently, Tristram calls attention to

Walter Shandy's philosophizing, making clear that it differs little from that of others: "Like all systemattick reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture every thing in nature to support his hypothesis." Yet Tristram does not think Walter's reasoning is always wrong, and more than once he is quite explicit in setting forth one of the principal duties of his readers: "How far, in many of his notions, he might, tho' odd, be absolutely right;—the reader, as he comes at them, shall decide" (I, 19).

Tristram serves also to propound a view of reason which has become a twentieth-century commonplace in various forms such as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. Stated very generally, this view of reason is that the measure or assessment of an "object" is a function of the scale of values or perspective which is used to measure or assess with. Tristram often refers to scales of values or perspectives, but the following two passages are most explicit on the point: "Mr. *Shandy*, my father, Sir, would see nothing in the light in which others placed it;—he placed things in his own light;—he would weigh nothing in common scales" (II, 19), and "every object before him presented a face and section of itself to his eye, altogether different from the plan and elevation of it seen by the rest of mankind.—In other words, 'twas a different object,—and in course was differently considered" (V, 24).

The idea that the product of the intellect is a function of its technique makes the scale of value, perspective, or frame of reference as important as the object. It leads to Sterne's frequently seeing quantity as flexible and measurement as comic. *Sentimental Journey* is particularly full of that sort of thing, but *Tristram Shandy* has many instances too. While his wife is giving birth, Walter says to Toby,

from the moment the mistress of the house is brought to bed, every female

in it, from my lady's gentlewoman down to the cinder-wench, becomes an inch taller for it; and give themselves more airs upon that single inch, than all their other inches put together.

I think rather, replied my uncle *Toby*, that 'tis we who sink an inch lower. (IV, 12)

It leads also to a good deal of mock exactness about measurement, as in the following description of Walter's blushing: "He must have reddened, pictorially and scientintically speaking, six whole tints and a half, if not a full octave above his natural colour" (III, 5). A tint (X) is comic because it is not an exact unit (Y). But it is not simply absurd because there is no such thing as an exact unit and the tint could easily be made as exact as most units are (Z). There is no such thing as an exact unit because all units exist as arbitrarily chosen "points" on infinitely divisible scales. Fortunately, approximate measure is usually sufficient whether one is considering the diameter of a pin, the nature of the Gothic, or how much Walter Shandy blushed. A tint could easily be made reasonably useful simply by fixing arbitrarily how many there are between minimum and maximum redness. Of course, whether it is worth knowing "exactly" how much Walter blushed may depend on matters which are even more difficult to measure.

Another minor incident which can show reason as the subject matter of the comic in *Tristram Shandy* occurs during one of Walter's lamentations.

But I say, *Toby*, when one runs over the catalogue of all the cross reckonings and sorrowful *items* with which the heart of man is overcharged, 'tis wonderful by what hidden resources the mind is enabled to stand it out, and bear itself up, as it does against the impositions laid upon our nature.—'Tis by the

assistance of Almighty God, cried my uncle *Toby*, looking up, and pressing the palms of his hands close together—'tis not from our own strength, brother *Shandy*—a sentinel in a wooden centry-box, might as well pretend to stand it out against a detachment of fifty men,—we are upheld by the grace and the assistance of the best of Beings.

—That is cutting the knot, said my father, instead of untying it. (IV,7)

This is similar to the scene in Aristophanes' *Clouds* in which Socrates maintains that rain is caused by the clouds and Strepsiades that it is caused by the gods' emptying their chamberpots. The pious explanation of Uncle Toby (X) is comic because we, like Walter, are likely to think of an explanation as concerning itself with fairly immediate causes (Y). But Uncle Toby's explanation does explain, and its finality has the advantage of not raising more questions than it answers (Z). He does indeed cut the knot, but Sterne had already suggested that eventually this is the only solution for getting rid of the knots in life. When Obadiah brought Dr. Slop's bag of obstetrical instruments tied up with a multitude of hard knots, Tristram tells us, "In the case of these *knots* then, and of the several obstructions, which, may it please your reverences, such knots cast in our way in getting through life," we ought to "take our teeth or our fingers to them" (III, 10). However, when Slop tries to untie them, his teeth and his fingernails are quite inadequate, and the pressing need for his instruments forces him to use his penknife. That in the process, he cuts his thumb indicates that there is still something to be said against cutting the knots.

Tristram's way of thinking is also evident in the form of *Tristram Shandy*. Others have treated this subject quite well, and little need be added here. Victor Shklovsky has shown that it departs from the form of experience or

life. Ian Watt has shown that it departs from the form of Richardson, Fielding, and Defoe. Wayne Booth has shown that it departs from the form of Henry James. But all these men and others too have shown that if we hold our temper and let Tristram tell his story in his own way, the story will be seen to have a logic of its own. Although our previous experience may have led us to believe these other forms reasonable, Tristram's is reasonable too, and much that is comic in the novel is devoted to showing us that this is so. In fact, by the time we have finished what Watt has called this "parody of a novel," we may well think that if there is such a thing as a natural form or plot for comedy, *Tristram Shandy* has it.

III

In treating the major episodes of *Tristram Shandy*, I think it will be clear enough to leave all algebra behind. I do so at this point, serving notice that the order I will use in discussing each incident is X, Y, and Z, with most of the effort being spent on Z.

The first major episode is the begetting of Tristram, an act which is interrupted by Mrs. Shandy's asking Walter, "Have you not forgot to wind up the clock?" The first sentence of the novel has already provided a frame of reference which makes Mrs. Shandy's question absurd: "I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me." An opposing standard we may find well stated by Whitehead: "It is a profoundly erroneous truism, repeated by all copy-books and by eminent people when they are making speeches, that we should cultivate the habit of thinking of what we are doing. The precise opposite is the case." The problem here is whether one ought to mind what he is doing in the sex act. There would be more to be

said for Tristram's point of view if he were correct in thinking that what one is doing in the sex act is simply begetting children. However, to say the least, what one is doing is considerably more manifold than that. One is also, presumably, doing something like giving and receiving pleasure as an expression of love, and there are surely few who would need D. H. Lawrence to tell them that keeping one's mind on these aims threatens both pleasure and love. What makes this scene even more comic after we are better acquainted with Mrs. Shandy is that she is so mindless as to frustrate almost any aim of the sex act, except the one which Tristram attributes to it.

After allowing us to enjoy for two chapters a joke about sex, Sterne generalizes the issue involved here from what is the extent to which one ought to mind what he is doing in the sex act to what is the extent to which one can mind what he is doing in any act. He does so by showing another kind of sense which Mrs. Shandy's question makes. Mr. Shandy has developed the regular habit of discharging his marital obligation and winding the clock on the landing the first Sunday night of every month, with the result that Mrs. Shandy's mind has been subjected to "an unhappy association of ideas which have no connection in nature." It is, of course, common to create a comic character by making him unusually subject to the accidents of association. Mental associations such as these, according to Locke, give "consistency to nonsense," as Sterne recognized when he had Tristram say that this "strange combination of ideas, the sagacious *Locke*, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all other sources of prejudice whatsoever." Locke treated such an association as one against which the reason was helpless, which is what Sterne's scene shows.

The accidental association of ideas does not, however, form the only basis for the critique of reason in the scene, because it is not simply a temporal accident which has caused Mrs. Shandy to associate Mr. Shandy's winding of the clock with his winding of her. Sterne's frequent use of phallic references and puns should make it clear that he was not altogether serious in referring to this association of ideas as having no "connection in nature." In this respect he goes one better than Locke, who did not think the natural association of ideas implied a limit to reason. The point is that the structure of thinking and the structure of action are different, so that minding what one is doing can only be approximated. In the metaphor used by Locke and his followers, Sterne could have sensed this flaw, for if thinking consists—even at its best—in a "train of ideas" that are naturally or logically connected, and if what one is doing is more than he can possibly have his mind on, action is not encompassable by reason in the way that Tristram expects of Mrs. Shandy. Others may do a better job of it than she does, but this simply assures us that there is something to be said for Tristram's view. This intellectual problem, as refocused by Sterne, shows up in many ways. It is the problem the novelist faces in treating complex and simultaneous actions in a temporal medium. It is the problem Marshall McLuhan has shown with "linear" thinking in a non-linear environment. Lastly, to choose a more homely example, it is the problem which has caused the old baseball adage: "Don't think, man. Swing."

Tristram believes his parents should have minded what they were doing because he believes the homunculus to be fully a man and entitled to unruffled "animal spirits." The explanation of human behavior by its material determinants is a frequent source of the comic in *Tristram Shandy*, and early in the

novel, we are alerted to its possibilities: "The HOMUNCULUS, Sir, in how-ever low and ludicrous a light he may appear, in this age of levity, to the eye of folly or prejudice:—to the eye of reason in scientifick research, he stands confess'd —a BEING guarded and circumscribed with rights." What we see with the eye of reason is absurd to the eye of folly because we are not prepared to believe that animal spirits exist, that homunculi have them, that sudden starts by the parents during the sex act can be held responsible for the human behavior of adults, and so on. However, the homunculus does have rights, and they must rest on some human qualities. And some, at least, of the moral and intellectual behavior of the adult will be transmitted by the parents physically. We may prefer "genes" to "animal spirits," and we may think that moral influences on the child and adult are more important than the physical assimilation of moral influences. But Tristram's argument is not simply absurd.

All this is less important, though, than the critique of reason suggested by this argument. If reason has trouble assessing or apprehending action that is in progress, it has a similar difficulty in defining, particularly when it is trying to define man—because man too is in progress. The purpose of definition is to fix something so that our minds can deal with it. If the thing to be defined is not fixed—and things in *Tristram Shandy* have a way of not being fixed—one is forced to choose some kind of "point" in its progress and fix it mentally. The question is at what point in the development of a man does a human being emerge? The only point that has much claim to real existence is the moment at which the egg is fertilized, and this has determined Tristram's thought, just as it has that of others. The more comprehensive view suggested by the novel is that the rights to life, to unruffled animal spirits, to being baptized, and to wearing breeches

require many definitions of man and that these definitions depend on what rights we are thinking of bestowing, not vice versa.

The argument by which Tristram hopes to establish the full human status of the homunculus has another bearing on the capabilities of reason.

That the HOMUNCULUS is created by the same hand,—engender'd in the same course of nature,—endowed with the same loco-motive powers and faculties with us:—That he consists, as we do, of skin, hair, fat, flesh, veins, arteries, ligaments, nerves, cartilages, bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations;—is a Being of as much activity,—and, in all senses of the word, as much and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of England.

This playing off the results of analysis as if they constituted the whole that was analyzed occurs several times in the novel—in the hot chestnut episode, for example. It makes man equal to the sum of his parts, and anything with the same parts a man. Of course, we do not know all the parts of man, and the obvious incompleteness of Tristram's list underlines the absurdity of thinking that we do. But any such list is doomed to incompleteness, not only because man is always changing, but also because the purposes for which analyses can be undertaken are numberless, and the purposes determine the parts of an object just as much as the object does.

Another major episode in the novel is the naming of Tristram. His father has a theory "that there was a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impress'd upon our characters and conduct." He argues, "How many . . . are there who might have done exceeding well in the world, had not their characters and spirits been totally depress'd and NICODEMUS' d into nothing" (I, 19).

Walter's idea of a "magick bias," like Tristram's materialism, is an attempt to explain the mysteries of human character and fortune. He claims too much for it, just as Tristram claimed too much for "animal spirits," which were also supposed to have irresistibly impressed characters and conduct. But Walter, like Tristram, does make some sense. For one thing, he does not claim that all names have this power. After Sterne has had much of his fun, we find out that he considers most names neutral. It is names such as Trismegistus, Archimedes, Caesar, and Pompey that are "good," and names such as Simkin, Nyky, Nicodemus, Judas, and Tristram that are "bad." The influence of these names, as Walter makes plain, is exerted through their metaphoric transfer of associated ideas, operating on what will be thought of those who carry them. Although weaker than Walter thinks, such an influence will not be denied in an age that has seen the cost of "Adlai."

The bearing of this scene on reason is quite direct, and it brings us to the social aspects of reason. We like to say that language is conventional, that the relation of reference and referent is arbitrary. And so it is, but this very fact causes a feedback from the referent to the reference that gives to words lives of their own and prevents us from treating them as arbitrary. We have already seen that with reality in motion, there are taxing problems, fixing our attention on actions and defining the organic or dynamic. Here names, which constitute our basic tool for thinking, are in motion too, and what is Trismegistus downstairs may well become Tristram upstairs.

A good deal of the comic critique of reason in this scene arises from Walter's method of arguing his theory.

Your BILLY, Sir!—would you, for the world, have called him JUDAS? —Would you, my dear Sir, he would say, laying

his hand upon your breast, with the genteelest address,—and in that soft and irresistible *piano* of voice, which the nature of the *argumentum ad hominem* absolutely requires,—Would you, Sir, if a Jew of a godfather had proposed the name for your child, and offered you his purse along with it, would you have consented to such a desecration of him? —O my God! he would say, looking up, if I know your temper right, Sir,—you are incapable of it. (I, 19)

Concerning the opponent to whom this argument is addressed, Sterne tells us nothing. He is faceless, a generalized type of the sort of opponent Walter might have. One effect of this is to prevent a comic focus on the difference between the opponent's real character and the one Walter imputes to him. Rather, the focus is on the contrast between Walter's mode of argument and an argument addressed to the issue, which is the kind we think we have a right to expect. The result, I think, is to suggest an *ad hominem* aspect to any argument. The intellectual problems so far discussed occur because of the differing structures of thought and reality. Argumentation, however, attempts to structure thought not only to achieve some consonance with reality, but also to fit the structure of thought held by another person. This is what makes us seek a common ground with an audience or opponent. It is made necessary not only by the desire to persuade, but also by the desire to prevent the infinite regression of thought. What Walter has done is to take as his common ground the authority and capability of his opponent to judge the issue. Of course, Walter's acknowledgement of his interlocutor's authority is conditional on agreement with him, and this ought not to be so. But what other method is there for choosing our authorities?

The problem faced by reason in argumentation is even more complicated.

Another result of the facelessness of Walter's opponent is to make us see that the character Walter imputes to him is a projection of himself, or at least what he thinks of himself. He is a man of good sense, candid disquisition, and "a liberality of genius above bearing down an opinion merely because it wants friends." Like Walter too, he is desperate for honor and respect. Thus, even the *argumentum ad hominem* is not true to our idea of what it should be. Its form is not determined by the character of the person addressed, but by that of the person addressing it. And yet what other kind of *argumentum ad hominem* is there, but the kind addressed to our idea of another person, an idea determined as much by what we are as by what he is?

The problems caused by the social use of reason can exist whether one is dealing with an opponent or not. In the episode of Tristram's breeching, we are shown in the "bed of justice" scene how Walter makes decisions through a sort of philosophic dialogue with Mrs. Shandy.

We should begin to think, Mrs. *Shandy*, of putting this boy into breeches.—

We should so,—said my mother.—We defer it, my dear, quoth my father, shamefully.—

I think we do, Mr. *Shandy*,—said my mother. . . .

—I can not (making two syllables of it) imagine, quoth my father, who the duce he takes after.—

I cannot conceive, for my life,—said my mother.—

Humph!—said my father.

(The dialogue ceased for a moment.)

—I am very short myself,—continued my father, gravely.

You are very short, Mr. *Shandy*,—said my mother.

Humph! quoth my father to himself, a second time. (VI, 18)

This is Sterne's version of a type of comic scene met with frequently—in

Joseph Andrews (IV, 6) for example, where Fielding has Mrs. Slipslop serving as Lady Booby's echo. The technique is simple: an inferior is flattering a superior by agreeing with everything he says, but the superior sometimes means the opposite of what he says, so that when he is agreed with, he is outraged instead of flattered. Fielding's purpose was undoubtedly to show affectation, but Sterne's purpose is different, because Mrs. Shandy has no sentiments of her own to utter.

In the preceding volume, Tristram had given his prescription for philosophic dialogue, and it may well be taken as a standard for judging this scene: "I reverence truth as much as any body; and when it has slipped us, if a man will but take me by the hand, and go quietly and search for it, as for a thing we have both lost, and can neither of us do well without,—I'll go to the world's end with him" (V, 11). Walter departs from this standard, by not treating truth as something that both he and Mrs. Shandy have lost. He, like Lady Booby, makes dialogue into monologue. However, to do this is simply to change the persons engaging in the dialogue, not to eliminate it altogether. Walter makes his decision from two different debates with Mrs. Shandy—one on the first Sunday night of each month, and the other on the Saturday preceding. Just as his *argumentum ad hominem* was addressed to a projection of himself, the dialogue in these debates is between two selves of the same person, so that "from the two different counsels taken in these two different humours, a middle one was generally found out, which touched the point of wisdom." This may not be the way dialogue is supposed to work, but it does suggest not only that there is a good deal of monologue in dialogue, but also that there is a good deal of dialogue in monologue.

Mrs. Shandy is likewise not an ideal partner in what we usually expect a

dialogue to be. She is, nevertheless, a very good partner in the type of dialogue that is taking place. Her sexual submission contributes to the real dialogue by causing the difference between the Walter of the first Sunday night in the month, and the Walter of the Saturday preceding. And her equally automatic intellectual submission does recognize the facts of her position. What Walter wants her to do is the same as he wants Uncle Toby to do—to comprehend, not to weigh the grains of truth. This is, of course, impossible, and Mrs. Shandy, like Uncle Toby, does neither. Her instant agreement may be as exasperating as Toby's *Argumentum Fistulatorium*, but agreement is what Walter wants of her.

Even before the bed of justice scene, we have been informed that Walter really put Tristram into breeches "in a kind of huff," caused by the rumors of Tristram's emasculation. No matter how fine Walter's machinery of rational dialogue, then, the real decision is the result of emotion. The situation presented is a familiar one. Emotion is a competitor of reason, and well-regulated men will keep it subordinate, so as to preserve order in the microcosm.

Emotion, however, is not so distinct from reason as the theorists of the Great Chain of Being suggested. It is not simply a competitor of reason which can be suppressed in the interests of thinking well. Instead, it influences the form of thought itself, as long as man retains his present constitution. Tristram may wish that man were differently constituted, but such a wish is beside the point: "I love the Pythagoreans (much more than ever I dare tell my dear *Jenny*) for their . . . 'getting out of the body, in order to think well.' No man thinks right while he is in it; blinded as he must be with his congenial humours. . . . REASON is, half of it, SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions" (VII, 13). Here is the greatest

problem reason has, and I think we can see it in the last episode of *Tristram Shandy*.

Uncle Toby's amours with the Widow Wadman center upon the misunderstanding caused by two different passions, so that when Mrs. Wadman asks where he received his wound, Uncle Toby measures off thirty toises from the returning angle before the gate of St. Nicolas, and lays her finger on the very place. Mrs. Wadman's concupiscence makes her eager to find out whether Uncle Toby is impotent before she marries him, but she has to be delicate to keep from destroying his love for her. She is forced to equivocation and intrigue, as in the several questions she addresses to Dr. Slop about Toby's wound. What she does not foresee is that the question she puts to Toby is also equivocal, and he answers in accord with his hobby-horse. He is a soldier, whose "singleness of mind" has led him "far out of the little serpentine tracks in which things of this nature usually go on." His idea of woman is sexlessly chivalric, and he answers Mrs. Wadman as if she measured up to this idea.

The connection between reason and passion is emphasized by Sterne over and over again. The bed of justice scene takes place on the first Sunday night of the month, and Walter is "pressing the point home" to Mrs. Shandy, who "cannot conceive." The great bulk of Sterne's sexual innuendo is put in the service of associating reason with what is most obviously emotional, so that reason comes to appear just another mode in which passion may assert itself. Although Tristram does seem to hope at times that reason may control passion, the solution shown in the novel is quite different. All we can see controlling passion is another passion—the hobby-horse. Sterne uses the horse symbol in the same way that Euripides and Fielding before him, and Lawrence and Faulkner after him, used it. But the hobby-horse

is a special kind of horse, which results from channeling the passions into play and giving to others the same privilege. Although it does not solve the problems of reason, *Tristram* recommends it to alleviate the larger problems of life.

For my hobby-horse, if you recollect a little, is no way a vicious beast; he has scarce one hair or lineament of the ass about him—'Tis the sporting little filly-folly which carries you out for the present hour—a maggot, a butterfly, a picture, a fiddle-stick—an uncle *Toby's* siege—or 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—'Tis as useful a beast as in the whole creation—nor do I really see how the world could do without it—

—But for my father's ass—oh! mount him—mount him—mount him—(that's three times, is it not?)—mount him not:—'tis a beast concupiscent—and foul befall the man, who does not hinder him from kicking. (VIII, 31)

IV

It is tempting to believe that we can read literary works without any theoretical presuppositions, but the only available choice is between being aware of our presuppositions and being unaware of them. Therefore, it ought to be useful to look for a moment at the theory on which this paper is based, with the same sort of scrutiny with which it encourages us to treat other theories.

Obviously, this theory is the product of romantic thought, with its stress on subjectivity, the tension of opposites, and the fluidity of reason. That it fits *Tristram Shandy* ought not to be surprising, because many of those who originated it had Sterne in mind. In *The Amiable Humorist*, which traces the development of romantic comic theory in England, Stuart Tave has shown the

effect of Sterne's example on changing the meaning of the word "humour," and the effect of Sterne on German theorists such as Jean Paul Richter is even more decisive. Thus, there is considerable evidence for Earl Wasserman's contention that *Tristram Shandy* forms a sort of watershed between romantic thought and that which preceded it.

If *Tristram Shandy* focuses on the operation of the mind, however, this ought not to obscure the fact that this theory of the comic, when applied to earlier works, may be unhistorical. Its subjective and dialectical character will not only discourage us from finding one character or idea right and another wrong, but it may also encourage us to find, at least as an implicit sub-theme, a critique of reason in every comedy. Section two of this essay has shown a sufficient amount of commentary to establish that Sterne intentionally called into question the idea of reason dominant in his time. But it is very improbable that Molière, for example, would intend anything of the sort. The idea of reason in his time was more absolute, a fact reflected in the contemporary theory that the function of comedy was to chastise follies and vices. If, therefore, we wish to react as Molière and his audiences probably thought they were reacting, we should find the *honnête homme* possessed indeed of common sense and the buffoon-protagonist afflicted with a malignant obsession.

Whether, in a given comedy, it is worthwhile to be conscious of its critique of reason depends on the focus and commentary of the work. Whether, in a given comedy, to sympathize with buffoons would seem to depend as much on the reader. The problem involved here has already been explored by Robert Langbaum, in *The Poetry of Experience*. In treating romantic criticism of Shakespeare, he contrasts E. E. Stoll's historically supported contention that Falstaff represented to the Elizabeth-

than audience a comic butt because of his cowardice, with Maurice Morgann's view that Falstaff is an admirable, though not exemplary, character. The question is important because of its bearing on the theme of honor in the *Henry IV* plays. We might choose both views of Falstaff, as most observers of our day would, but such a choice is also a romantic reading that a consistent historical critic would deplore.

I did not bring up this problem in order to solve it, but I would suggest that the solution depends on what kind of knowledge we are seeking. To know the pastness of the past requires historical knowledge and historical imagination; to know the presentness of the past, which is the task of romantic criticism, requires even more. I am aware

that the historical critic does not think the greater comprehensiveness of romantic criticism a virtue, but for most purposes I believe that those who are interested in the relevance of the humanities will want to judge not only by the standards of the past but also by the standards which they believe in. The bulk of criticism since 1800 (including that of Eliot, Hulme, and Leavis) has been romantic, and I do not think we would be creating better readers—or men—by suggesting that they stop sympathizing with Falstaff, Malvolio, Harpagon, or Alceste. To me, it would seem a far more worthwhile critical task in dealing with any comic character to determine “how far, in many of his notions, he might, tho’ odd, be absolutely right.”

Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*: Tragedy as Denouement

MICHAEL M. DORCY

PROFESSOR MAYNARD MACK, among others, has remarked that drama is an obvious, yet an often neglected, link between literature and life, and this at all levels of education. Drama is a unique type of *meeting*, to borrow Martin Buber's term. It is not a real life encounter of two persons; rather, it is, or can be, a meeting with oneself in the transparent other. This is especially true of tragedy at its best. And it is especially the time element of tragedy, that sense of the present, which controls the involvement one experiences in the much discussed tragic enterprise.

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Some time ago, Richard Chase criticized T. S. Eliot for what he chose to call a “loss of the sense of the present moment in time and the sense of the world about us, the sense of *what is present*.”¹ Chase's citing of poets whom he considers to have conveyed a “sense of the present” at least questions the sweeping indictment by some critics that all poetic activity is basically romantic and therefore an ahistorical enterprise, an escape from time and time's stuff.

The artist, it would appear, has an option. This is especially evident in the dramatic or tragic arts; in these the artist can either side step or come to

¹Richard Chase, “The Sense of the Present,” *Kenyon Review*, VII (1945), 218-231.