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Response as Reformation: *Tristram Shandy* and the Art of Interruption

J. PAUL HUNTER

I

The way *Tristram Shandy* digests bits of this and chunks of that, it does not seem surprising to find an entire Sterne sermon included, word for word (Vol. II, ch. 17). Looked at in one way, this stratagem is like a host of other Sternean stratagems where themes, ideas, or systems from all sorts of places are bodily taken over and absorbed into the Sternean purposes of the work. It happens to *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote*, suggestively at first and then overwhelmingly; it happens to Rabelais, Swift, and Fielding; to the Church Fathers; and to learning so arcane that the standard edition of *Tristram Shandy* is overwhelmed by footnote descriptions of "sources." Such allusiveness makes fun of itself, and we are continually made wary of becoming the pedant who sees all, recognizes all, systematizes all. Yet we are guided by a writer who does all that but is not the prisoner of his learning—who, rather than being confined by the borders of his predecessors, invites all learning into his own work, there transforming it into something that fits his own artistic needs. The omnivorous maw of *Tristram Shandy* devours whatever it finds, and nothing remains undigested.

Such a work challenges us with its learning, not only to discover its sources and recognize the allusions, but to justify the homogenizations and interpret the transformations. When an eighteenth-century writer controls tone, introduces a theme, or engages a norm by allusion to *Hamlet* or *Don Quixote*, we are not surprised by the technique, for it is a common one. Self-allusion may, in certain instances, also be somewhere in this spectrum of allusive uses, as Pope teaches us, even though such allusions turn inward toward form, rather than outward toward the work's historical reception and interpretation. But when an entire discrete work like Yorick's sermon is embedded whole it may seem at first untransformed, undigested. Yet whatever separate existence the sermon may have, when it is included in *Tristram Shandy* it is affected by the fact that it bears relationships to the rest of a larger work. It is another illustration (and an extreme test case) of the powers of context over something that in another place is self-sufficient, and it is an indication of the lengths to which Sterne will go to examine the process of transformation.¹

¹ The fullest examination of the sermon itself is by Arthur Cash, "The Sermon in *Tristram Shandy*," *ELH*, 31 (1964), 395–417; Lansing van der Heyden Hammond has considered its relation to the homiletical tradition in *Laurence Sterne's Sermons of Mr. Yorick* (Yale Studies in English, 108; New Haven, 1948). For examinations of the sermon in the context of *Tristram Shandy*, see the brief but suggestive discussion by John M. Stedmond, *The Comic Art of Laurence Sterne* (Toronto, 1967), pp. 85ff., and the longer but less satisfying one by Henri Fluchère, *Laurence Sterne: From Tristram to Yorick*, trans. Barbara Bray (London, 1965), pp. 225ff.

Sterne himself had preached the sermon—"On the Abuses of Conscience"—on 29 July 1750, and he published it shortly after, ten years before he included it in *Tristram Shandy*; he later included it again in *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* (Vol. IV, 1766). In those instances it asserts its relation to the eighteenth-century homiletical tradition. There it shows us Sterne as an orthodox Anglican divine, examining a major theological and moral issue in a way approved by the conventions of sermon rhetoric. Sterne's theological and moral position remains the same in *Tristram Shandy*, and the sermon asserts the stance that moral man ought to take, but the positioning of the sermon in the novel demonstrates that man does not take that stance and that he does not learn from the usual attempts to make him do so. As a sermon it is a failure in *Tristram Shandy*: Trim weeps for his brother, Walter theorizes about oratory and authorship, Uncle Toby fortifies his hobbyhorse by sorting out the military metaphors, Dr. Slop sleeps. No one whets his conscience on the sermon; in fact the sermon itself becomes an emblem of lack of conscience, for (according to Tristram's account of its genealogy) the sermon was plagiarized.² Yet the sermon is not a failure in the larger sense, for its reception demonstrates what will not, and what will, move the minds of men. Here is incorporated an instance of the limits of conventional rhetoric, a demonstration of the richness of human response, predictable not by the standards of conventional rhetorical theory but by the methods which take more exact account of the way the mind of perverse man works—methods explored in the human world of *Tristram Shandy*, a world which in spite of its eccentricities is far more like our own world than we care to admit.

II

No reader who navigates chapter 17 remembers much about the sermon as such. Plain solemn prose does not fare well when interrupted by the gesticulation and debate of the Shandean folk, and here it is interrupted often, sometimes for a sentence or phrase, sometimes for minutes at a time. The pattern is set at the beginning: the first seven words of the sermon are followed by a lengthy and increasingly esoteric conversation, five minutes worth, at least. The emphasis in such a presentation falls not on moral abstraction or theological argument but on the interruptions. Even the *exempla* in the sermon do not compare for liveliness to the squabbling of Walter and Dr. Slop or the tearful cries of Trim. Such upstaging of the sermon's content is no accident; it is part of the general motif in *Tristram Shandy* of watching the responder at work—of using the book's characters as surrogates for the reader who can learn about his own responsive process by watching the eccentric (but predictable) Shandean responses.

² Sterne is, of course, toying with his Sterne/Yorick distinction here; part of the effect is simply comic play, and part is self-mockery or an in-joke, for Sterne had in fact taken a passage on the inquisition from Richard Bentley. After Sterne's death there was quite a fuss about his supposed "plagiarism" of sermons, and he may be teasing earlier rumors or engaging a "confessional" strategy that would interest his psychological critics. But the charges of plagiarism were greatly exaggerated in the late 18th century. Hammond (p. 105) prints the parallel Bentley passage, only a paragraph. But I think we must, in reading the history of the sermon in *Tristram Shandy*, distinguish the biographical or pseudo-biographical from the fictional strata; I wish to emphasize the effect, in context, of the fictional fact. See below p. 136.

Given the laws of this world, the responses are all characteristic. Each character responds to the sermon exactly the way he does to anything else—in terms of his own hobbyhorsical preoccupations. The ideas of the sermon penetrate not at all; all meaning is grounded into meaninglessness on the lightning rod of the character's eccentricity. Even before the sermon begins, inevitable responses are clear; the assemblage is scouring Stevinus for a drawing of a chariot, and the whimsical Sterne has the literal-minded Trim shake the book to see if a chariot falls out (ch. 15). The sermon emerges instead, and everyone is willing to accept the substitute vehicle:

I think 'tis a sermon, replied Trim;—but if it please your Honours, as it is a fair hand, I will read you a page;—for Trim, you must know, loved to hear himself read almost as well as talk.

I have ever a strong propensity, said my father, to look into things which cross my way, by such strange fatalities as these;—and as we have nothing better to do, at least till Obadiah gets back, I should be obliged to you, brother, if Dr. Slop has no objection to it, to order the Corporal to give us a page or two of it, —if he is able to do it, as he seems willing.

Once the sermon begins (in fact, once the text is announced) everyone falls into his predictable posture. For Walter Shandy, all responses are filtered through the meticulousities of his System. First he addresses himself to Trim's oratory ("you give that sentence a very improper accent; for you curl up your nose, man, and read it with such a sneering tone, as if the parson was going to abuse the Apostle"), and he keeps a running account of the writing and speaking style ("The language is good, and I declare *Trim* reads very well"). Later Walter debates the parson's theological stance with Dr. Slop, not because he intends to be influenced by it but simply because he is intellectually interested in deducing whether the writer is Protestant. Similarly, he deduces its occasion ("I see plainly . . . that this sermon has been composed to be preached at the Temple,——or at some Assize") and congratulates himself for seeing in advance that the Parson and St. Paul will agree ("it is now clear, that the Parson, as I thought at first, never insulted St. *Paul* in the least;—nor has there been, brother, the least difference between them"). His interest is not in what the sermon might do for him, but rather in what his mind can do with the sermon. For Walter, a sermon is as good a vehicle as a chariot and, whatever its quality, will go just as far.

For Uncle Toby, all the world is battles and fortifications, and he shows little interest in the proceedings except for a question here and there inspired by the comments of others ("Pray is the Inquisition an antient building . . . or is it a modern one?"; "Pray how many [sacraments] have you in all . . . for I always forget?"). But suddenly Toby's attention is arrested, not because the sermon's ideas move him but because its imagery touches his only responsive chord:

"Conscience has got safely entrenched behind the Letter of the Law; sits there invulnerable, fortified with Cases and Reports so strongly on all sides;—that it is not preaching can dispossess it of its hold."

[Here Corporal Trim and my uncle Toby exchanged looks with each other. —Aye, —aye, Trim! quoth my uncle Toby, shaking his head, —these are but sorry fortifications, Trim. —O! very poor work, answered Trim, to what your Honour and I make of it. . . .]

Now Toby becomes enthusiastic and laments the sermon's shortness:

I wish it was longer, quoth my uncle Toby, for I like it hugely.

Later, he revels again in a literal response to the military metaphors, but his enthusiasm does not extend beyond the military speculation it begets; there is no carry-over to the sermon's ideas, and Sterne gives us no hint that Toby's conscience is improved at all.

Trim shares Toby's celebratory response to the military metaphors, but his major response is an even more private one: he is moved, by the sermon's attack on Catholicism, to bewail the unknown fate of his brother at the hands of the Inquisition. Ultimately, he confuses one of the sermon's *exempla* with his brother and is overcome by anger and grief:

[Oh! 'tis my brother, cried poor Trim in a most passionate exclamation, dropping the sermon upon the ground, and clapping his hands together — I fear 'tis poor Tom. . . .]

The other hearers comfort Trim by assuring him that the document is only a sermon:

[Why, Trim, said my father, this is not a history, — 'tis a sermon thou art reading; — pri'thee begin the sentence again.] . . . [I tell thee, Trim, again, quoth my father, 'tis not an historical account, — 'tis a description. — 'Tis only a description, honest man, quoth Slop, there's not a word of truth in it. — That's another story, replied my father. . . .]

But finally Trim is overwhelmed, and Walter must finish the reading—still punctuated by the cries of Trim who first wishes his brother alive, and then wishes him beyond the miseries of this-worldly torture. Trim purges his pity and fear in the performance, but purgation is on his own terms, not on the sermon's. His emotional response parallels Walter's intellectual one; both make the sermon answer the needs of their hobbyhorses while the sermon's subject and aims remain unregarded.

For Dr. Slop the relevant matter is his own Catholicism, and he comes the closest to grappling with the sermon because the sermon directly assaults the area of his greatest concern. Still, he does not react to the sermon as such, but rather to the topic; far from being moved either intellectually or emotionally, he is only concerned to correct it. From the beginning, he is suspicious and defensive, certain that the sermon is Protestant and therefore will attack his system of belief. He takes Trim's articulation of the text as a clue, and he is already flailing away long before the attack begins:

the writer (who I perceive is a Protestant) by the snappish manner in which he takes up the Apostle, is certainly going to abuse him,—if this treatment of him has not done it already. But from whence, replied my father, have you concluded so soon, Dr. Slop, that the writer is of our Church?—for aught I can see yet,—he may be of any Church:—Because, answered Dr. Slop, if he was of ours,—he durst no more take such a licence,—than a bear by his beard:—If, in our communion, Sir, a man was to insult an Apostle,—a saint,—or even the paring of a saint's nail,—he would have his eyes scratched out.—What, by the saint, quoth my uncle Toby. No, replied Dr. Slop,—he would have an old house over his head.

Slop continues to interject, first to prove the correctness of his Protestant attribution, then to defend Catholic faith and practice, including the Inquisition. He is the noisiest of the interrupters, silent only when Popery is really under attack. But Slop's most significant response comes later when, upon hearing the familiar solacing word, he falls asleep:

"Let CONSCIENCE determine the matter upon these reports;—and then if thy heart condemns thee not, which is the case the Apostle supposes,—the rule will be infallible;" [Here Dr. Slop fell asleep]. . . .

Slop does not even wait to hear what the rule is, once he discovers it to be infallible. Ideas pass him by as they do the others; his responses are triggered only by his own expectation or by a key word which (irrespective of context or meaning) signals an automatic reaction.

Once the sermon is finished, the hearers repeat again their responsive patterns, and the inefficacy of the sermon is again underscored. The hearers engage in much theoretical speculation about the sources of homiletic effectiveness, and they assure themselves that this particular sermon, read in this particular way, is very effective indeed:

I like the sermon well, replied my father,—'tis dramatic,—and there is something in that way of writing, when skilfully managed, which catches the attention.

But here no attention is caught, and the speculation and assurance give themselves the lie; no one speaks of the sermon's content, and there is no later evidence that any of the hearers have improved their notions of conscience at all.

The final emphasis of the episode falls on the journey of the sermon into Uncle Toby's copy of Stevinus, a journey that underscores the impotence of the homily by implying its effect (or lack of one) on hearers beyond the Shandy household. Sterne here invokes the history-of-the-weapon convention and characteristically works curious variations upon it. One of his accomplishments is to emphasize the unusual connection of *Tristram Shandy* with Sterne himself and to toy with both the affirmation and denial of Yorick as Sterne—a toying which (like many another aspect of *Tristram Shandy*) may well raise pertinent questions for the psychological critic who is concerned with why Sterne identifies himself with a character and then insists on a distinction between them. But my concern is not

with the extra-literary question here; I wish rather to emphasize the literary effect which the fictional history of the sermon produces. Never mind, for a minute, that Sterne published his own sermon, or at least one that was substantially his own. The *fictional* fact is that the sermon was preached and published by a prebendary who was *not* its author. Clearly, his conscience was not improved by hearing about abuses of conscience, or even by preaching on them, for he is able to send the sermon, first orally and then in print, into the world as his own. Such an account of where the sermon has been underscores its inefficacy and raises the question of whether any sermon, according to *Tristram Shandy*, will have its desired effect on human beings.

III

The ultimate question is whether any didactic work—sermon, tract, satire, or novel—can have the desired effect on human beings, or whether in fact all is vanity, and the didactic intentions of a moral philosopher are the greatest vanity of all. Sometimes this question has been answered with assurance about Sterne: that *Tristram Shandy* proves the vanity of all intentions, and that here we have demonstrated the total subjectivity of all men—so much so that no moralist or artist can calculate or predict the effect he may produce on men who bring their own hobbyhorses and ultimately ride away on them. I believe *Tristram Shandy* proves the opposite: that in spite of subjectivity and eccentricity, men share certain responsive patterns and that the writer or speaker in possession of this knowledge may indeed manipulate his readers or hearers in a way that he can predict and control. The comic responses to noses, hats, bridges, and hinges—induced by the associations Sterne sets up³—seem to suggest the possibility of controlled evocation, and the sermon episode sets up some guidelines by demonstrating pitfalls to be avoided by a would-be didacticist.

The protagonist of *Tristram Shandy*, one might argue, is the Reader.⁴ Even when he is not on the printed page as “Sir,” “Madam,” or “Your Worship,” he is present for the conception of the work, presumably working alongside Tristram and helping design the work for himself. Of course, much of this is posture, if not imposture; Sterne’s calculation and control are far more comprehensive than his devices allow him to show. Yet, in a larger sense, the reader always governs the artistic choices, for, rather than giving his reader loose-leaf options as he sometimes pretends, Sterne, just like other novelists and rhetoricians continually makes those choices expressly to move a definable response. But how can he predict a general response when he so elaborately details the hobbyhorsiness of each individual? Sterne realizes that he cannot know the hobbyhorse of each reader, and that he could not appeal to them all even if he did. What he does is set up means of canceling the more circuitous travels which hobbyhorses offer. Chief among his means is exploration and exposure of the nature of response through close examination of a limited number of characters. Such examination isolates those

³ My point is that Sterne *uses* associational psychology to set up rhetorical strategies. I do not regard Sterne as a blind mimic of the processes of the mind, conceived associationally.

⁴ For a related discussion, see Andrew Wright, “The Artifice of Failure in *Tristram Shandy*,” *NOVEL*, 2 (1969), 212–20.

elements which remain constant in spite of individual preoccupations and exposes all the responsive weaknesses which flesh is heir to.

If the characters are, in fact, surrogates for the reader and if they expose their responsive liabilities as in the sermon episode, then the reader is jolted into a kind of awareness by observing the absurdities of the scene. He is invited to discover with what preoccupations he approached the scene, the book, or literature generally. Such an invitation, even when successful, does not guarantee correction, but it does short-circuit one of the most active enemies of response and allows a resourceful artist to attempt enlarging the areas of audience response.

Awareness of the follies of others may awaken a sense of folly about one's own actions and attitudes, especially if the exposure has been relentless and all-encompassing. Watching everyone else misrespond to the sermon, a reader may well wonder how he himself misresponded, and if he is perceptive and fair he is likely to admit that his conscience was as unmoved as those of the Shandean. Such awareness does not necessarily intensify one's engagement with Sterne's ideas on conscience, but it does broaden one's knowledge of what his responsive processes are like. A reader of the sermon episode is likely to learn that he does not respond directly to straightforward moral exhortation; such information is useful to a reader, but it is even more useful for a writer to know that readers are the way they are, especially in a time when didacticism is assumed to be a value in art, and when the relevant question is about successful methods of reaching an audience.

Tristram Shandy is about response because it is about the nature of art. Sterne's concern is not primarily to sharpen the reader's sense of awareness (although that is an important by-product of his efforts), but to describe possible ways of moving a response. To define the possible, he exposes the impossible, those straightforward methods which assume that a reader will pay attention and learn what he is told to learn. The sermon is one form that uses such methods, though it is only one. Akin to it are various panegyric and hortatory forms, in prose and verse, which portray the ideal and assume that man, limited and fallen though he may be, will readily respond to reason and appeals to the benevolent part of his nature.

Such forms and assumptions come to eighteenth-century literature from an older and more confident age—when men could feel themselves more justified in praising and more rewarded in their direct appeals for honor and justice. Augustan writers are increasingly nervous about these forms and assumptions, not only because of their traditional Augustinian view of fallen human nature but because eighteenth-century events seemed to conspire in illustrating the depravity and perversity that man is capable of engraving on civilization. For the Augustan mind, desperate situations demanded desperate answers, and if the traditional didactic forms and methods did not work, they had to be replaced with forms and methods that did. This is but one reason that we find such a wide discrepancy between neoclassical theory of genres and the practice of the major Augustans in fusing genres and working great variations upon their conventions, not only in their play poetry but in official ministrations of their public function. Whatever the ancients might have known about proprieties, modernity had produced mu-

tants that had to be dealt with, and in the real world which Augustan poetry engaged were grotesqueries that could not be exposed by strict adherence to rules that were premised on better times and better men. The georgic, for example, was continually merging with satire to make its didactic point, for models, imitation, directness had to be matched or superseded by spectres and indirection if real men were going to respond.⁵ Of course the old forms and old methods stayed on (ironically they were engaged primarily by those most in harmony with modernity, while new methods were employed primarily by conservatives who were willing to be rash in order to provoke a return to old values), and one cannot point to a sharp end to direct moralizing; but co-existent in the early eighteenth century was the strain of didacticism which we usually associate with the great Augustan moralists—the later Dryden, Swift, Pope, Fielding, Hogarth. This strain does not usually hold up models of perfection (except as a rhetorical norm), nor rely on straightforward exhortation (passages read that way often turn out to be ironic, as in Pope's *Essay on Man*). Rather, it attempts to laugh or frighten man from his follies and vices, and to tease him into awareness through satiric inversion and irony.

The necessity for such indirection is succinctly stated in the prefatory rationale for *Directions to Mankind in General*, a 1745 treatise which is distinguished not for its subtlety or individuality but rather its typicality in using irony to "advise" courtiers, lawyers, divines, physicians, and justices of the peace:

There lurks in the Heart of Man so strong a Principle of Revolt against all Advice or Instruction, that there is not, perhaps, a surer Way of giving his conduct a wrong Byass, than by attempting, in that Way, to guide and set him right.

This Waywardness, so conspicuous in Childhood, strengthens with Years; and all that is got by teasing pretty Master or Miss, with sage Council, is, that they hate you, stick the closer to their innate ruling Passion, and as they grow up, according to their Capacities, acquire more Art to cover, or excuse it.

*Hence that constant State of Hostility between Principle and Practice, which bewilders and puzzles so much the Unacquainted with the actual System of Human Life, opposed to that of speculative Morality; which, one would imagine, was only so well known, so strongly inculcated, and so inwardly approved, that it might be the more splendid Sacrifice, in practice, to our Vices and Passions.*⁶

Such a passage clarifies not only the didactic grounds of irony but helps to define the suspicion that some didacticists had of other didacticists, such as Swift's distrust of Defoe and Fielding's of Richardson. For if perverse men refused to follow straightforward advice and imitate ideal models, such straightforwardness might actually encourage folly and vice.

⁵ The most suggestive recent account of such genre-crossing is by Ralph Cohen, "The Augustan Mode in English Poetry," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 1 (1967), 3–32.

⁶ pp. 3–4. The treatise is attributed to "Dr. Fitzpatrick."

I have briefly (and simplistically) sketched some eighteenth-century disagreements about didacticism because in reading Sterne we need to be reminded that denigration of a didactic method does not necessarily equal anti-didactic and amoral (or immoral) sentiments. Such a reminder would not be necessary if we were to think of Sterne in terms of his Augustan predecessors, but critical predilection with his modernity, rebellion, sentimentality, and pre-Romanticism are apt to cast his exposures of didactic inefficacy into an eerie and misleading light as anti-didactic, cynical, amoral. Sterne *is* often concerned to correct his predecessors, but theirs is the context he chooses. In many ways, *Tristram Shandy* is a very old-fashioned book, not only in terms of the battlegrounds it chooses, but in terms of the aims it espouses; only the rules of battle are varied to meet the needs of his situation and even the rules are not as different as they first seem to be. As the great Augustans teach us, literature may be sharply innovative and still preach the old verities; it may be highly unconventional and still depend crucially on convention and a presumed response. *Tristram Shandy* is old-fashioned just as *A Tale of a Tub* is old-fashioned and Wotton and Bentley are not, just as *The Dunciad* is, and Cibber and Theobald are not.

IV

The sermon episode offers us perspective on *Tristram Shandy's* place in the eighteenth-century debate about didactic methods, showing Sterne not to be eccentric and unorthodox, but rather to be traditional in his skepticism of human nature and suspicion of human response. The method of exposure in the episode is similarly traditional, for the dramatic portrayal of garbled response to moral exhortation is not as original as Sterne makes it seem. Such a portrayal is part of what we might call the "whole-as-observed-part" tradition, a tradition related to the "play-within-a-play" and previously used in eighteenth-century prose fiction. Its fundamental characteristic is the use of an interpolated tale to show how characters react to it. I do not here propose to offer a detailed account of that tradition but I do wish to point up its prominence and to indicate the variations that Sterne works upon its conventions.

Interpolated tales are common in eighteenth-century novels, as they had been in earlier fiction; *Don Quixote* is only the most famous instance. But many such tales participate in the "whole-as-observed-part" tradition. We have not usually paid attention to how they are received in the action of a fictional work, because our recent penchant for "unity" has turned attention to their content—especially their themes and their parallels to the main action. Many interpolated tales may need to be approached in terms of content, but in Sterne (as in Fielding before him) it is the response of the hearers that deserves our real attention, for we are not dealing with an insert or a simple parallel, but with a major demonstration of how such interpolations are received into the novel's main action.

Tom Jones makes perhaps the most prominent use of the "whole-as-observed-part" tradition, and Sterne may well have taken his cue there for the sermon episode, as he did for many other strategies in *Tristram Shandy*. Fielding's novels

include several tales where the main narrative action is interrupted to hear a shorter narrative, complete in itself. Such are the tales of Leonora and Mr. Wilson in *Joseph Andrews*, and those of Mrs. Fitzpatrick and the Man of the Hill in *Tom Jones*; closely related are the puppet show and the London performance of *Hamlet*. The frequency and density of audience interruption varies widely in these tales and performances, but one major interest of the digressions lies in what we learn about response from watching the digression interrupted.⁷

The tale of the Man of the Hill is one of the most significant of these; it is near both the spatial and artistic centers of *Tom Jones*. This narrative and the response it provokes help to focus the novel's concern with how an audience is made to respond to a didactic work. Fielding is not perhaps so skeptical as Swift or Pope of human nature, but neither is he so easily persuaded as Defoe and Richardson that man, presented with appropriate models and corrective exhortation, will follow the good, the true, and the beautiful. Thus he complicates Tom as an object for emulation and even slightly humanizes Sophia, though for Fielding humanizing women too much is a somewhat different matter.

Fielding's incorporation of the Man of the Hill parodies the straightforward moralizers. The Man's name "sounds" allegorical,⁸ and his tale is shaped like the spiritual biographies and autobiographies which were popular in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, especially among Puritans—a shape that was imitated in much didactic fiction.⁹ The Man begins with an account of his birth and early life of degradation, salvaged at last by his repentance and disillusioned withdrawal from society. He is a mixture of Robinson Crusoe, Lord B, and Gulliver, and his voluntary isolation as a hermit seems excessive and stupid in the joyful, life-loving world of *Tom Jones*. Much of this effect is produced by the Man's manner—solemn, egocentric, and ultimately boring; he self-righteously recounts details calculated to justify his Timon-like misanthropy. His performance seems especially humorless and tedious because of its contrast with the rest of *Tom Jones*, and a reader is apt to conclude that one would need to desire edification very badly, perhaps desperately, to profit from the autobiography of the Man of the Hill.

⁷ Howard Weinbrot's fine essay, "Chastity and Interpolation: Two Aspects of *Joseph Andrews*" (*JEGP*, 69 [1970], 26n) conveniently lists most standard discussions of interpolation. Also relevant are Douglas Brooks, "The Interpolated Tales in *Joseph Andrews* Again," *MP*, 65 (1968), 203-13; Glenn W. Hatfield, *Henry Fielding and the Language of Irony* (Chicago and London, 1968), pp. 201ff.; Robert Alter, *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 108ff.; Leon V. Driskell, "Interpolated Tales in *Joseph Andrews* and *Don Quixote*: The Dramatic Method as Instruction," *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 33 (1968), 5-8; and Manuel Schonhorn, "Fielding's Digressive-Parodic Artistry: *Tom Jones* and The Man of the Hill," *TSL*, 10 (1968-69), 207-14. From different perspectives, Weinbrot and Driskell share my concerns with in-the-novel responses. The most suggestive recent discussion is by Martin C. Battestin, "Tom Jones and 'His Egyptian Majesty': Fielding's Parable of Government," *PMLA*, 82 (1967), 68-77, an essay which has implications far beyond the episode which it examines.

⁸ The name seems to derive from the "Lord of the Hill," who prepared a refuge for sojourners in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I think Fielding expected his readers to recognize the name as allusion and thus find the Man's lack of hospitality an inversion of expected and approved behavior. One might further regard the Man as Fielding's anti-Puritan version of what Christianity becomes when it follows the Calvinistic vision of man's lonely pilgrimage.

⁹ I have discussed such shapes more fully in *The Reluctant Pilgrim* (Baltimore, 1966).

Fielding's handling of the tale underscores its inefficacy. Not only is the teller made to seem unattractive, misguided, and dull, but the tale itself—set as it is in the midst of a lively, spirited, engaged pursuit of a moral standard to fit the needs of man in society—seems ponderous and irrelevant, and it is presented in a stark, pseudo-allegorical style that contrasts sharply with the basic style of *Tom Jones*. As an alternative to the ethic Tom is working out, it is simplistic and unpersuasive, for it emphasizes disenchantments rather than solutions and ignores the complex responsibilities of social man. The Man's *method* of moralizing is equally inadequate, compared with Fielding's own. The Man relies upon the simple re-counting of an individual experience to make a universal point; Fielding vividly portrays moral anxieties and complexities, and he reasons with his reader, using the full resources of his ironic stance to invite the reader to watch, evaluate and decide for himself. Fielding's narrator is no less certain of his own morality, but he reasons and cajoles, while the Man dogmatizes, expecting a straightforward, automatic response.

But it is the in-the-novel response to the Man's tale which ultimately makes Fielding's point. Tom is the most important member of the audience, but Partridge is more active during the tale and Fielding uses him for a greater variety of purposes. His role resembles that of the collective hearers in *Tristram Shandy*, for Fielding is working on a smaller stage (in this particular scene) and he lets Partridge perform functions which Sterne parcels among a number of characters. Partridge continually interrupts to footnote or comment, demonstrating from the beginning that his major interest is not in hearing what the Man has to say. His first interruption comes before a word of the Man's tale (end of ch. 10, Book VIII), and scarcely a paragraph goes by when Partridge interrupts again. The Man has described his industrious father and now begins to portray his mother as an "arrant vixen," and a queen shrew:

But though this circumstance perhaps made him miserable, it did not make him poor; for he confined her almost entirely at home, and rather chose to bear eternal upbraidings in his own house, than to injure his fortune by indulging her in the extravagances she desired abroad.

*"By this Xanthippe" (so was the wife of Socrates called, said Partridge)—
"by this Xanthippe he had two sons, of which I was the younger. . ."*

This interruption is ostensibly a kindness to Tom, for Partridge offers a "learned" footnote; but actually, while trying to show off his knowledge, he merely demonstrates his ignorance of how words work. Unable to understand figurative language, he assumes Xanthippe to be the name of the Man's mother; his footnote thus "explains" what the teller assumes will be immediately understood as allusion. A paragraph later, Partridge interrupts again to assure the Man that he understands his point because of an analogous personal experience. This time "Jones chid the pedagogue for his interruption," and the Man proceeds for several minutes before Partridge again intrudes, curious about a detail. Now Tom begins to be embarrassed and "begged the gentleman to proceed without regarding any impertinent questions." And so it goes. Sometimes Partridge questions

("Nubbing cheat! . . . pray, sir, what is that?"; "Pray, sir, where was the wound?"), sometimes he comments (" . . . evil spirits can carry away anything without being seen . . ."). Once he interjects a long story of his own, prompted only by the slightest of topical similarities. Several times Tom shows his annoyance at Partridge's responses, but efforts to quiet him do not avail.

Some of Partridge's impertinencies arise from his being typed as a schoolmaster; his explication of Xanthippe, his injection of a Latin phrase and his detailing of the translating ability of a character in his story all show this preoccupation. But many of the other interruptions are less specific; more than a schoolmaster he becomes a type of the impertinent reader who feigns interest only to exercise his own ingenuities. Partridge means well enough (or thinks he does), and when the Man fears that his tale is getting too long and his philosophizing too boring, Partridge assures us of his interest:

"Philosophy elevates and steels the mind, Christianity softens and sweetens it. The former makes us the objects of human admiration, the latter of Divine love. That ensures us a temporal, but this an eternal happiness. But I am afraid I tire you with my rhapsody."

"Not at all," cries Partridge; "Lud forbid we should be tired with good things."

But the nature of his interruptions suggests that Partridge had learned little. Although he is a closer listener than anyone Sterne offers us, he does not profit much:

Partridge . . . had fallen into a profound repose just as the stranger had finished his story; for his curiosity was satisfied, and the subsequent discourse was not forcible enough in its operation to conjure down the charms of sleep. Jones therefore left him to enjoy his nap; . . .

Tom is more polite during the whole lengthy story and probably more attentive, but his response is hardly what the Man might wish for. Tom begins predisposed to hear of the Man's life; in fact, it is at Tom's urging that the tale gets told at all. But though Tom appears moved by the Man's misfortunes, he is not attracted to the Man's conclusions; misanthropic isolation holds no more charm for Tom at the end of the tale than at the beginning.

Fielding contrives events to make the point clear. The episode of the Man of the Hill begins with Tom rescuing the man from thieves—a rescue which demonstrates the necessity of human acceptance of social responsibility. Without Tom's social concern, the Man would not have been left to tell his tale. And when the tale is over, there is another rescue, just as Tom and the Man have climbed Mazard Hill and taken a prospect both backward and forward. (This passage seems to derive its power from the space/time prospect tradition used by Denham and Pope, and points to the figurative dimensions which Fielding's work sometimes engages.) Tom does not hesitate when a woman screams; immediately perceiving his responsibility, he rescues Mrs. Waters and subdues her attacker, Ensign Northerton. For Tom, the depravity of human nature requires not isolation but involvement; the Man's story, together with his passive conduct during Tom's

struggle with Northerton, only underscores the inadequacy of a philosophy which allows man to think of himself as self-satisfied—free from the brutal confrontations of human interaction and social reality.

Interpolations may offer alternatives to the implications of the main action, or they may parody the main action on another level, or they may simply provide resting places for the weary reader. But in the Man of the Hill episode, it is the responses to the tale—immediate and ultimate—which “place” the tale in *Tom Jones*. The rejection of the tale, first by an enthusiastic listener who can’t keep his mind attentive, and second by one who reflects carefully and finds its message inadequate, primarily means a rejection of an outlook on life; but the moral method, because of its parodic basis and its ill success in the arena, comes in for critical glances as well.

Fielding’s use of the interruptions is more than comic relief from the solemnity of a long, tedious story, and what he does with the episode relates to one of his central concerns in *Tom Jones*—defining not only an acceptable morality but describing a successful method of inculcating morality. Partridge is a surrogate for the typical reader, good-natured in his intention to learn but ultimately more anxious to justify himself and preserve his own views and his own comfort. Tom, more like the ideal, attentive reader Fielding wants for his own novels, finally evaluates the morality and efficacy of a tale not in terms of abstract belief but in terms of its ethical application.

Sterne’s use of the “whole-as-observed-part” is thus not focused exactly as it is in Fielding, but Sterne follows him (and the tradition) in using the responses of the in-the-book hearers to make this point. For Sterne, the point is more rigorously argued than in Fielding or in any other example of the tradition that I know. Sterne strips bare the pretense that readers will learn anything at all from straightforward moral discourse; Fielding had merely, in the process of exposing an inadequate moral system, cast some glances at inadequate methods and implied that bad morality uses bad methods. But he is more sanguine that men can see through such methods; his is a “softer” view of humanity than Sterne’s, for he is confident that bad morality is ineffectual by any method, whereas Sterne finds that even good morality will not be persuasive when supported only by conventional methods. Sterne splits Partridge’s role among the responses of four characters, and emphasizes that the more individual the responses, the more they are alike: there is no Tom in *Tristram Shandy*.

V

If my analysis of the sermon episode is correct and if Sterne’s artistic concerns are really with methodology more than with ideology, then the central problem of *Tristram Shandy* is to set up some positive possibilities for the rhetorician—possibilities that conform to the realities of human response. These positive possibilities are a highly complicated matter, worthy of extended discussion, and here I can only hope to cite a few examples of Sterne’s moralizing and sketch briefly the grounds of his method.

Sterne is full of sign-posts, strategies verbal and non-verbal which underscore this and point to that. Such sign-posts ostensibly tell us what to watch for and what to look at with care. There are hands, italics, underscoring phrases ("This is to serve for parents and governors instead of a whole volume on the subject"), and we soon learn to smile at them in our superior way—rejecting their satiric target, the pointed moral. Yet there is finally something troubling about the sign-posts, for oftener than not it turns out that the sign *does* point to something and that when we are through smiling at the device we are left with the fact that the device, though improperly thought out in conventional didactic rhetoric, was properly employed by Sterne. We are permitted (or forced to) the "double take." First, it seems absurd for anyone to be so grossly straightforward and direct (exaggerating to its logical conclusion the openness of a sermon or moral tract); then, when the device is dismissed, the passage seems worth another look.

A great many things in *Tristram Shandy* derive their ultimate effect through the double take (which seems to be produced by double mirrors), for the device frees the reader from blatant absurdity through a glorified self-consciousness which works via the same in-group principle as does Augustan satire. Then he is "free" to see matters as they are, not through a set of preconceived stereotypes. The joke often turns out to be that the stereotypes represent matters as they are, but when a reader gets there by a method which convinces him of its own honesty, he does not mind learning something he would have been unwilling to accept had it been told to him straight. Sterne is concerned with the fact that stereotypes are worn out; his target is not what the stereotypes represent.

The black page bemoaning the death of Yorick is an early example of the double take. There (Vol. I, ch. 12) Sterne sets up his death's head, and he does it comically. The page is black because that is the conventional color for death and sadness. So far as I know, no one has ever cried much over this page, and when a reader first comes upon it he is likely to laugh in surprise at the blatant and simplistic reduction of symbol. Yet ultimately the absurd black page is one of many sign-posts that underscore the way we respond to Yorick, for once all the kidding is done—with sorry nags, threadbare clothes, tombstones, stolen sermons, and gimmicks to say that Yorick is now among the dear departed—we are back to the figure from *Hamlet* who shows us just where we stand in relation to a topsy-turvy, scurvy, mutable world that includes Dr. Slop and Tristram as well as Trismegistus and Alexander the Great. If pride is the great enemy, Yorick (alas) is the great moral warrior, and black pages and pointed fingers (as well as words that turn back on themselves) are among the weapons that Sterne can give him.

The didacticism in *Tristram Shandy* is like the bawdiness. It is carefully set up so that no one can say that the teller is responsible. If you, dear sir and madam, think of something else when Sterne narrates of the Slawkenbergius nose, then it is you who have the dirty mind. Similarly, if you contemplate your own mortality when you see a black page, or hear the name "Yorick," it is you who make the association and are responsible for the thoughts that follow. Of course, it is Sterne who has dismantled the hobbyhorses and replaced them with his own rhetorical patterns so that a sensitive reader cannot help himself, but Sterne has an alibi by

normal didactic standards. No court in the literate world can convict; the guilt is clear, though not demonstrable. Sterne thumbs his nose at us, but the gesture turns out not to be what it seems.

Two-level self-consciousness (one dismissive, the other assertive—and in this order) is characteristic of Sterne. It is annoying and sometimes infuriating because not only are things not what they seem; they are not the opposite of what they seem either, and a good deal of attentive engagement is necessary to sort things out. While a reader may puzzle and tie himself in knots over *Tristram Shandy*, he can hardly use the book for his own purposes, or fall asleep where its words assert their authority. If he finds it (like life) too complicated, too difficult, too infuriating, he can abandon it; but if he stays with it he will (especially if he is an artist) leave a wiser man. The process is everything, and it is enough.