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Source: *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century (Summer, 1961), pp. 53-63

Published by: Rice University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/449305>

Accessed: 16-03-2020 09:40 UTC

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Satire and *Tristram Shandy*

J. M. STEDMOND

THE EIGHTEENTH century is often summed up as the age in which the appeal to reason was gradually superseded by the appeal to the heart; *cogito ergo sum* was replaced by *je sens donc je suis*.¹ This is a convenient formula, and much of the literature of the time fits into it rather neatly. Early eighteenth century satire, such as that of Swift and Pope, launched attacks on the misuse of reason and on those who allowed themselves to be dominated by their passions. As the century advanced, such satire softened into sentimental comedy—Congreve was replaced by Goldsmith. The writings of Sterne, coming as they do in the third quarter of the century, seem to support this thesis admirably. "Dear Sensibility" dominates *A Sentimental Journey*, and the tone of *Tristram Shandy* is manifestly different from that of *A Tale of a Tub*—far less biting, much more good-humored. If, however, *Tristram Shandy* is viewed simply as one more piece of evidence demonstrating the change from scintillating wit to whimsical buffoonery, then the conclusion inevitably follows that Sterne's clowning is finally of little consequence, that it contains no "positive implications," that it is, if anything, negative.² On the other hand, Sterne obviously introduces many of the same satiric butts as do Swift and Pope, even though his treatment of them differs from theirs.

I

A comparison of *Tristram Shandy* with, for example, the *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* reveals the similarity in objects chosen for attack by Sterne and the Scriblerians. Most apparent, perhaps, is the comic virtuoso, the "philosopher of ultimate causes," of which Cornelius and Martinus Scriblerus and Walter Shandy are varia-

¹Cf. Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background* (London, 1940), p. 108.

²Cf. Edward N. Hooker, "Humour in the Age of Pope," *HLQ*, XI (1947-48), 381: ". . . the Shandean extravagancies are purely good-natured and harmless. They conceal no positive implications." In his introduction to the Odyssey Press edition of *Tristram Shandy* (New York, 1940), lxxv, James A. Work said that Sterne "toys with his satire in a kindly, almost affectionate manner, and makes it less a stricture on anything external to himself than an unconscious revelation of the triviality of his own mind."

tions, but there are a number of others. Theories of pre-natal influences, for instance, are satirized in the opening chapters of the *Memoirs*, as they are at the beginning of *Shandy*, though the "prodigies" which attend Tristram's birth are of a much more pedestrian kind than those which Martinus shares with the heroes of antiquity. Walter Shandy, however, in his *Tristrapaedia*, unquestionably matches Cornelius in his concern with his son's education, and manages, like Cornelius, to take a number of pot shots at conventional notions. A chapter in the *Memoirs* is devoted to fun at the expense of abuses in "Rhetorick, Logick, and Metaphysicks," and Sterne, in his turn, includes thrusts at formal logic, scholastic pettifogging, and the decline of oratory. At one point, the Scriblerians have Martinus attempt to find out the seat of the soul, and, in the ensuing satire, align themselves with the reaction against the theories of Descartes. Walter Shandy is convinced by Uncle Toby's account of a Walloon officer who had one part of his brain shot away that Descartes was wrong in fixing the soul on top of the pineal gland, and, speculating that it is much more probably "somewhere about the medulla oblongata," proceeds to make this the basis of his obstetric theory that children should be delivered feet first, or, better still, by Caesarean section. Chapter Fifteen of the Scriblerian *Memoirs* is entitled "Of the strange, and never to be parallel'd Process at Law upon the Marriage of Scriblerus, and the Pleadings of the Advocates." A legal quibble is a decisive factor in Tristram's life, dooming him to be born in the country and hence to have his nose squeezed flat by the man midwife, Dr. Slop. Ecclesiastical courts are castigated in "Slawkenbergius's Tale," and also at the canonical dinner at which Didius, Phutatorius, and company hold forth on the casuistical aspects of Tristram's bumbled christening.

Even a superficial comparison of the *Memoirs* with *Tristram Shandy*, then, brings to light a certain similarity in the objects selected for satiric treatment in each. But there the similarity ends. Sterne has dramatized these materials much more effectively; he has rooted the foibles in vivid coherent characters.³ *Scriblerus*,

³In a sense, as John Traugott has shown in *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954), Sterne's characters are exempla, symbolizing conflicting attitudes. Cornelius and Martinus Scriblerus are, however, nothing but exempla; they never really come to life. If they had, of course, the satire would presumably have lost some of its effect, since then the reader might have tended to sympathize with them, rather than concentrating on the vices for which they stand.

like *A Tale of a Tub* and the *Dunciad*, is an attack on abuse in learning. It is part of the perennial war between wits and "dunces," between humanist and pedant; a war which became particularly vehement in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in England, because of the general shift in the structure of society resulting from the rise of the middle classes. This is the tradition to which *Tristram Shandy* belongs. Walter, Toby, Tristram, all are manifestations of the dunce. Sterne, like Swift and Pope, was keenly interested in preserving the rule of "wit"—in pricking the pretentious windbags of pedantry whose hold over the great public was obviously growing. However, writing later in the century, and in York rather than London, his view of the situation was somewhat different from theirs. He could no longer feel that direct, though devious, attacks on the dunces themselves could unseat them and loosen their grasp on the leading reins they had attached to the public.

He realized, as did Swift by the time he wrote *Gulliver*, that satire must now be aimed at the public itself, that the satirist could only weaken the influence of Grub Street by making the public more alert. The appeal, then, in *Tristram Shandy*, as in *Gulliver's Travels*, is not to the discriminating few, but to the indiscriminating many, in an attempt to make them more discriminating.⁴ Sterne's approach is much more diffident, much more tentative than Swift's or Pope's, and this is in part accounted for by differences in personality and circumstances. But it also reflects the growing scepticism of the age—the breakdown of the common-sense solutions offered by Locke and the rationalists. In philosophy, the thought of Hume parallels in many ways the implications of *Tristram Shandy*.

II

Inasmuch as Tristram may be considered as *rhetor*, the whole book consists of his "oration." But this is, of course, ironic rhetoric, the rhetoric of a "fool." And it carries some interesting implications about Sterne's conception of the nature of his audience. Like Swift in the *Modest Proposal*, he shocks the more squeamish members by reflecting much too accurately their own underlying preconceptions. One kind of empty verbalism against which both

⁴Presumably both Sterne and Swift, in view of the reactions of even the discriminating, rather overestimated the ability of the great public to read between the lines.

Swift and Pope inveighed was the fulsome praise of the prospective patron. Sterne's dedication of his first volume to Pitt is, significantly, not fulsome. It asks for nothing. But it does not take Sterne long to turn his attention to the usual kind of dedication, and he has his innings at the expense of the writer who will sell his dedication to the highest bidder and of the patron who will accept such an offer (I. ix.). Sterne was of course seeking a patron of a different kind—the reading public at large. He implicitly dedicates his book to them by titillating their tastes, while at the same time managing to satirize the human foibles involved in that taste. Thus, though dedicating his book to the “Lord Public,” he attempts to unseat that Lord from some of his “Hobby-Horses,” or at least to make him more aware of his “ruling passions.”

“With an ass,” Tristram says in his account of his travels in Volume VII, “I can commune forever.” Not so with jackdaws or apes, for they speak and act by rote. But with an ass, “surely never is my imagination so busy as in framing his responses from the etchings of his countenance—and where those carry me not deep enough—in flying from my own heart into his, and seeing what is natural for an ass to think—as well as a man, upon the occasion” (VII. xxxii.). The reader whose responses Tristram can gauge as accurately as he can those of an ass is one who will laugh at certain words in the bedchamber, but abuse them in the parlor. For his sake, Tristram must seek devices whereby he can “satisfy *that ear* which the reader chuses to *lend* me,” while not dissatisfying “the other which he keeps to himself” (VII. xx.). Thus, for instance, the off-color anecdote about the Abbess of Andoüillet is rendered less objectionable for the conventional reader by being linked with conventional attack on popery—a popery, incidentally, which is also conventionally linked with pedantic quibbles about matters of doctrinal interpretation.⁵ In the sentimental passages in his books, as has often been noted, Sterne pulls up short and thus reveals his consciousness of what is involved. In the same way, in the smutty passages, and the anti-papist pieces, he is self-consciously adopting conventional attitudes. He is ironically aware of what he is doing.

The crass wrongness of public opinion (including the opinion of those arbiters of taste, the critics) is a matter often commented

⁵One remembers, of course, that Church of England clergy were shown to be just as pedantic at the canonical dinner—and just as mixed in their reactions to the strange collision of Phutatorius and the hot chestnut.

on in *Tristram Shandy*. As everyone knows, Sterne chose a motto from Epictetus to prefix to Volume I: "It is not actions, but opinions concerning actions, which disturb men." The anecdote about Parson Yorick and his horse, very early in the first volume, provides an admirable illustration of the malicious nature of gossip. As long as it was to the parson's credit that he had decided to ride an old broken-winded horse rather than continually be replacing beasts worn out by parishioners who borrowed them for the purpose of fetching a midwife who lived some distance away, then gossip was silent. But as soon as he offered to buy a license for a local midwife, tongues began to wag and discreditable motives were supplied. Obviously Yorick "had a returning fit of pride" and "was going to be well mounted once again." Such being the case, in buying the license he was merely avoiding the otherwise inevitable and much more expensive wear and tear on his new horse. "What were his views in this," Tristram comments, "and in every other action of his life,—or rather what were the opinions which floated in the brains of other people concerning it, was a thought which too much floated in his own, and too often broke in upon his rest, when he should have been sound asleep" (I. x.).

Tristram, like Yorick, is obviously an enemy of the affectation of gravity as "a cloak for ignorance or for folly," but he seeks to escape the trouble into which Yorick's plain speaking gets him, by assuming the tone of defensive irony which permeates the book. From Yorick's example he has learned early the fate of jesters at the hands of knaves and fools whom they deride. Thus he is constantly on his guard, and takes steps to blunt the vengeful blows of his victims as much as possible. This is an important element in his self-consciousness—it is an "other-directed" self-consciousness. He is constantly entering caveats in the breast of his fair reader—a fair reader who, incidentally, often in the later volumes takes the form of the unfair critic. In Volumes I and II, though, we get a pretty clear impression of the reading public as Sterne visualized it, with its "vicious taste" for "reading straight forwards, more in quest of the adventures" than of "deep erudition and knowledge." Actually, of course, Sterne does little to satisfy "this self-same pruriency for fresh adventures"—specializing rather in "the gross and more carnal parts of a composition" to gain the interest of his readers sufficiently to make them vulnerable to his "subtle hints and sly communications" (I. xx.).⁶

⁶A description of the public of Sterne's day which coincides with some

III

In observing the reactions of the critics to his first volumes, Sterne undoubtedly became more conscious of the difficulties involved in communication. He opens Volume III with Dr. Slop's reading of Ernulphus' curse—a prime example of words separated from thought. The curse is “mere rhetoric.” And the whole business of noses, which figures so prominently in these volumes, is in one sense an extended commentary on that instability of language of which Locke had made so much. To some extent, like the scientists, Locke had held out for efforts at clearer meaning to be obtained by more exact definition of terms. But in his sport with possible connotations of “nose,” Sterne clearly demonstrates that, given some knowledge of human preconceptions, one has only to manipulate the context in order to manipulate the meaning. Protests of “one word—one meaning” simply serve to alert the reader to the possibility of *double entendre*. The Slawkenbergian story about the man with the long nose who so fascinated the people of Strasburg that they could think of nothing else, serves not only to titillate Sterne's readers, but also provides an excellent example of the futility of pedantry—and, even more, of its danger. The learned ones of Strasburg did nothing to alleviate the “nose-madness” of the townspeople. They merely facilitated the downfall of the town.

At the heart of the struggle against the perverse misapplication of intelligence, against learning without wisdom, as Aubrey Williams has pointed out in his recent study of the *Dunciad*, lay concern with the means, use, ends, and limits of human knowledge.⁷

aspects of the one implied in *Tristram Shandy* is to be found in John Brown's *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (5th ed., London, 1757). Note, for example, the following:

A strong Characteristic, this, of the Manners of the Times: The untractable Spirit of Lewdness is sunk into gentle Gallantry, and Obscenity itself is grown effeminate.

But what Vice hath lost in Coarseness of Expression, she hath gained in a more easy and general Admittance: In ancient Days, bare and imprudent Obscenity, like a common Woman of the Town, was confined to Brothels: Whereas the Double-Entendre, like a modern fine lady, is now admitted into the best Company; while her transparent Covering of Words, like a thin fashionable Gawze delicately thrown across, discloses, while it seems to veil, her Nakedness of Thought. (pp. 44-45)

⁷*Pope's Dunciad: A Study of its Meaning* (London, 1955), pp. 105-110. One of the principal fields of contention, then as now, was the problem of communication. How can one best convey knowledge, once it is obtained? The scientist and the logician, more interested in matter than manner, in

Father Shandy, that "excellent natural philosopher . . . much given to close reasoning upon the smallest matters," is a brilliant illustration of one who possesses knowledge, but not wisdom. He is so lost in speculative philosophy that he has no thought of the genuine needs of those under his charge—his wife and sons. He has so much theoretical concern for their welfare that he has lost touch with the concrete reality of their human wants and desires. Yet the "elements of Logick and Rhetorick" are "blended up in him" (I. xix.). He is eloquent, but he has no real knowledge to communicate—only eccentric speculations. However, even if he had attended Cambridge (Sterne's alma mater) he would have learned, according to Tristram, only the names of his rhetorical tools, not their genuine significance.

Father Shandy has knowledge, of a sort, but little compassion and almost no tenderness of heart. Uncle Toby is tender-hearted enough, but lacks knowledge of the world. His modesty is "unparalleled"—but not in regard to words (since he has very little choice of them) but to things. Toby has a "female nicety," the "inward cleanliness of mind and fancy," associated with that sex—a "cleanliness," however, that Tristram often apparently overlooks in his female readers if one can judge by the numerous questionable passages included for their delectation. As a matter of fact, as the narrative progresses we find that even the "innocent" Toby can appreciate the point of Dr. Slop's innuendo on "curtins and horn-works." In any event, Uncle Toby is not an orator. When Walter Shandy proclaims that the life of a family is nothing compared to an hypothesis which may bring one closer to *TRUTH*, and that, in the forum of science, there is no such thing as murder, only death—Uncle Toby can but whistle "Lillibullero" in answer. Toby's hobby-horse originates in fact in his inability to communicate, to express himself clearly, to explain to his visitors how he came by his wound. He seeks the help of "things"—visual aid in the form of a map—to replace words. "'Twas not by ideas,—by

things than words, tended to denounce the art of rhetoric as mere self-display. For the humanist, on the other hand, rhetoric, ideally, was the communication of wisdom. Pope, like Swift, attacked the sort of empty verbalism into which rhetoric had declined, as well as the "dunces" who, instead of learning to know themselves, either fastened on external factual knowledge, or sought knowledge beyond man's capabilities—were, in fact, knowledge-proud, lacking the humility which comes only through self-knowledge. The humanist-orator, then, is distinguished from the narrow metaphysician and scientist by his ability to put knowledge to use, to communicate his wisdom.

heaven! his life was put in jeopardy by words" (II. iii.). Toby, then, becomes, in his way, a virtuoso—a pedant—acquiring knowledge not, as he had originally intended, in order to communicate it in the form of accounts of how he obtained his wound, but rather accumulating, in a sort of mania, more and more facts about fortifications, not quite as ends in themselves, but as a sort of escape from such concrete problems of everyday human existence as those posed by the Widow Wadman. "Endless is the Search of Truth!" comments Tristram, and then goes on to demonstrate that what Toby is engaged in is pursuit of "phantom knowledge"—not wisdom in the humanist sense.

Father Shandy shares the "common-place infirmity of the greatest mathematicians! working with might and main at the demonstration, and so wasting all their strength upon it, that they have none left in them to draw the corollary, to do good with." He is a minute philosopher whose hypotheses tend to assimilate everything to themselves as proper nourishment. His "rhetoric and conduct" are "at perpetual handy-cuffs." "Inconsistent soul that man is!" says Tristram, "languishing under wounds, which he has the power to heal!—his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge!" (III. xxi.). Toby, in his turn, though he will not hurt a fly, is more concerned with his *idée fixe* than with the labor pains of his sister-in-law. Tristram, in fact, makes a distinction between Toby's *moral* character and his *hobby-horsical* character. Toby will spend any amount on his hobby-horse, and justifies the expense by contending that it is for the good of the nation. But his "campaigns," in one sense, display a desire to reduce large matters (such as wars) to small, maneuverable, and relatively innocent symbols. As occupational therapy they are, as the practical Trim foresaw, extremely effective—so effective, in fact, that they become, for Toby, almost the whole of life. The tendency to treat human beings as "things," evident in Uncle Toby's dehumanized version of war, is a dominant strand in the book. From the first we are made aware of the mechanistic basis of Father Shandy's theories. He prefers to reduce life to clockwork. The backslidings of Venus in her orbit are, for him, comparable to the backslidings of Tristram's Aunt Dinah. Both, for him, are part of a system.

IV

In Volume III Tristram makes jocular but significant reference to the decay of eloquence since classical times. Ironically, he uses

as an illustration of classical facility with words, the possibility of reinforcing the word by producing the very object mentioned from beneath the orator's cloak at the strategic moment. And the example given of modern incompetence in matters oratorical is not one concerning a failure of words, but rather Dr. Slop's fumbling attempt to provide concrete illustration of his words, an attempt which goes awry when he unfortunately seizes from his green baize bag not only the forceps with which he aids delivery of the child, but also the squirt used in administering pre-natal baptism (III. xv.). In the misplaced Author's Preface which appears in this same volume, Sterne speaks out on behalf of concrete illustrations as a readier means of communication than "tall, opaque words" which come "betwixt your own and your reader's conception."

"Writing," Tristram argues early in Volume II, "when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation." Throughout *Tristram Shandy* Sterne obviously tries to give the impression that he is really carrying on what amounts to a lively conversation with his readers, allowing them, from time to time, opportunities to reply. But for all the apparent attempt to produce dialogue, the book is for the most part monologue. The "dear Madam," or "fair reader," or even "Sir Critick" addressed by Sterne, is frequently a straw horse set up as part of the novel's devious rhetoric. Sterne's technique is, in fact, close to that of the pedagogue, or the preacher: extended commentary on a text; dialogue with a book, which, like Sterne's reader, has its answers provided for it.

The novel is the art form of the printing press—written by an individual sitting alone in his study for the eyes of another individual sitting alone in his armchair. For all his talk of elocution and oratory, Sterne thinks of his book as something to be *seen*, not heard. He is conscious of the way the words *look* on the page. He is constantly supplementing them with such visual devices as asterisks, and pointing fingers, and black and mottled pages. He even attempts to diagram the course of his various volumes. Such a Lockean concept of mind naturally gives rise to a distrust of words, which are after all a rather inadequate substitution of sounds for "ideas"—"ideas" which are originally, in the pre-speech phase, pictures or images projected on the screen of the mind. The one page in Sterne's book which "Malice will not blacken, and which Ignorance cannot misrepresent," is the one left blank for the purpose of allowing readers to draw their own picture of

the "concupiscible" widow Wadman. And the widow, incidentally, is probably the most effective "orator" in the book—with the possible exception of Trim. She is only too successful in communicating her amorous feelings to Uncle Toby—without, one notes, the use of words. Her principal means of "speech" is in fact her eye!

V

Book IV of the *Dunciad* paints a picture of Chaos ruled over by the "uncreating" Word, the babble of the Dunce. *Tristram Shandy*, in its way, is an extension of Pope's vision. It gives an account of human life not as a tale told by an idiot but as the story of a Cock and a Bull. Here is Tristram, the self-conscious Dunce, writing a book apparently modeled on the usual Grub Street productions of the time,⁸ but, like Swift in his somewhat similar enterprise in parts of *A Tale of a Tub*, producing instead a graphic description of the times. Here is the sort of fare the reading public wants—complete with that little ironic fillip of self-awareness which provides the necessary comment on that public and the world which it dominates. It is a world, then, in which the mechanical means of communication are becoming ever more and more efficient—while at the same time the articulateness, the ability to communicate, is steadily declining. Knowledge is on the upswing—wisdom on the downgrade.

Tristram Shandy is one more engagement in the perpetual war between wits and "dunces," but Sterne's rôle in battle is rather different from that of Swift or Pope. His approach is much more tentative, his attack much less bitter—presumably because his positive beliefs are much less surely held. Swift's writings "express" ideas, or communicate firmly held points of view by means of attacking their opposites. Sterne, on the other hand, is seeking to reveal states of mind, seeking to discover. Swift attacked the Grub Street hack by parodying his style; Pope sallied against the pedantic dunce by burlesquing his method; and Sterne, in his turn, donned cap and bells in order to show up foolishness by playing the fool. Unlike the others, however, the jester Sterne was willing to admit that he was able to act his part so well because he was, in fact, himself a trifle foolish. This of course accounts for the tendency of readers to evince more affection for Sterne the man than for

⁸Cf. Wayne C. Booth, "The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction before *Tristram Shandy*," *PMLA*, LXVII (1952), 163-185.

either Swift or Pope. It also accounts for the tendency to take what he says much less seriously, for by assuming the mask of fool one not only avoids a certain amount of responsibility for one's actions, one also denies the credit for one's "accidental wit."⁹

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⁹The comic tradition to which *Tristram Shandy* belongs is saturnalian rather than satiric. (Cf. C. L. Barber, "From Ritual to Comedy: An Examination of Henry IV," *English Stage Comedy* [New York, 1955], pp. 22-51.) As in saturnalia, Sterne's book is infused with the "holiday" atmosphere of release from normal limitations. Tristram, like the clown or Vice, is "a recognized anarchist who [makes] aberration obvious by carrying release to absurd extremes." He provides "both release for impulses which run counter to decorum and the clarification about limits which comes from going beyond the limit." But in order to signify a return to law and order, the clown king of saturnalian revelry becomes in the end a scapegoat. He, as symbolic representative of the aberrations inherent in society, is judged and condemned. His basic attitude is scepticism, so he is a potential danger to those in power. Only in a stable society can he be granted full license. In times of shifting concepts, he must, like Falstaff, be cast out. The potency of Tristram's clowning is revealed by the recurrent attempts, over the years, to nullify its implications.

For other discussions of the relation of *Tristram Shandy* to its tradition see the present writer's "Genre and *Tristram Shandy*," *PQ*, XXXVIII (1959), 37-51; and "Style and *Tristram Shandy*," *MLQ*, XX (1959), 243-251.