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17 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767)

Abstract: This chapter argues that the key narrative strategies of *Tristram Shandy*, particularly its blatant digressiveness and its play with various levels of time, directly result from central thematic concerns, namely Sterne's critique of Enlightenment scientific optimism and the equally optimistic benevolist assumptions of eighteenth-century moral philosophy. Moreover, the essay heuristically distinguishes two long-term traditions of Sterne scholarship: on the one hand, decontextualized approaches that frequently mine the novel for anticipation or mere confirmation of present-day concerns; on the other hand, historicizing approaches that often fail to do justice to the apparent 'modernity' of Sterne's text. However, these two traditions, it is argued, are not mutually exclusive: Presentifying readings – attempts to make *Tristram Shandy* relevant to our own time – do not have to be ahistorical if present-day concerns are traced to their roots in the central eighteenth-century contexts of Sterne's text.

Keywords: Enlightenment, moral philosophy, Newtonian science, satire, postmodernism

1 Context: Author, Oeuvre, Moment

Laurence Sterne, born in 1713 in Clonmel, Ireland, as the son of an army ensign, lived in or near military camps during much of his childhood and was sent to live with his uncle in Yorkshire at the age of ten. Having entered Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1731, he received a BA in 1737. He took holy orders, became vicar in Sutton-on-the-Forest in 1738 and was married in 1741; his daughter Lydia was born in 1747. He spent most of his life attempting to secure various positions in the church in and near York and, since he descended from an influential family of the Yorkshire gentry, he depended for this on patronage from family members. He repeatedly wrote – usually anonymous – pamphlets engaging in local politics and church quarrels and, in 1758, he entered a local church dispute by publishing the satirical pamphlet *A Political Romance*, which allows glimpses into the development of satirical strategies that were to become central to *Tristram Shandy* (see Walsh 2009). Plagued by ill health and financial distress for much of his life, the publication of volumes I and II of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* instantly made him a literary celebrity. He spent the last eight years of his life going back and forth between periods of frantic writing and extended stays in Paris, Southern

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France and Italy to improve his health. During this time, he published four more instalments of *Tristram Shandy* (volumes III and IV in 1761, volumes V and VI in 1762, volumes VII and VIII in 1765, volume IX in 1767). Early in 1768, only weeks before his death, he published *A Sentimental Journey*, his alter ego Yorick's account of travels in France, largely based on his own travels and observations. As with *Tristram Shandy*, its generic status is ambiguous and has spurred critical controversy: *A Sentimental Journey* has been classified as a novel, but it is also a thinly veiled travelogue and, though it functioned as a central text in literary sentimentalism in England and Europe, it can just as well be read as satirizing this mode [↗ 2 The Novel and Sense(s)]. Further capitalizing on the success of *Tristram Shandy* and on the identification of its character Yorick with Sterne himself, Sterne also published several volumes of his sermons as *Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, two volumes in 1760, volumes III and IV in 1765; three more volumes were published posthumously in 1769 (for a concise survey of the sermons, their place in Sterne's oeuvre and their relation to *Tristram Shandy*, see Parnell 2009; for the standard biographical account, see Ross 2001).

It is important to bear in mind that Sterne wrote at the height of the European Enlightenment but late in the history of the English Enlightenment. The influence of John Locke and other British thinkers on Voltaire, who was exiled in England in the 1720s, meant that British thought influenced the European Enlightenment as a whole via Voltaire's works. As a result, the period's optimistic notions of reason, science and progress, as well as the equally optimistic anthropological notions of human perfectibility and benevolence in the wake of British moral sense philosophy, are central intellectual contexts for *Tristram Shandy* (for a survey, see Gurr 1999, 19–53). On the one hand, Sterne is a central figure in the eighteenth-century satirical tradition of Alexander Pope and even more so of Jonathan Swift (↗ 9 Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*), who has often been seen as his most direct forerunner in this vein. On the other hand, he fits into the tradition of the eighteenth-century novel mainly associated with Defoe (↗ 8 Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* Trilogy), Richardson (↗ 10 Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*) and Fielding (↗ 11 Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*). His position in the genre of the novel, however, is rather ambivalent: He can with equal plausibility be seen as continuing and radicalizing some of the prevalent tendencies, as its early parodist and critic, or even as largely alien to the genre. *Tristram Shandy* is variously regarded as, for instance, a piece of "philosophical rhetoric" (Traugott 1954), as farcical mock-autobiography or as comic romance (for the genre context, see Folkenflik 2006; Keymer 2002). Controversial, too, has been its position in literary and intellectual history as either a postmodern novel *avant la lettre* or as a conservative, backward-looking work of defensive Christian scepticism (see Parnell 2006). What is uncontroversial is the position of *Tristram Shandy* as one of the most original and influential works of prose fiction in literary history.

Although the title announces an account of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, we learn precious little of the narrator's life, for while it begins with a remarkably circumstantial account of the act of his – putative – begetting (we can never be quite sure, as intimations of illegitimacy abound), the hero is not born before volume III, because innumerable digressions allegedly necessary to acquaint readers with central information on the family history and the fate of central characters like Tristram's father Walter, his Uncle Toby, parson Yorick, or obstetrician Dr. Slop, constantly impede the progress of the narrative. In addition to its notoriously digressive style, *Tristram Shandy* is striking for its strongly visual appeal and for the use it makes of the materiality of the book: Thus, the book features two black pages to commemorate the death of Yorick (Sterne 2003 I, xii, 31–32), two marbled pages in colour – individually produced and thus different in every copy of the first edition – as "emblems" of the variety of the work (III, xxxvi, 205–206), a blank page for the reader to draw a portrait of the lustful widow Wadman (VI, xxxviii, 423), a page of squiggly lines allegedly illustrating the narrative progress of volumes I–IV (VI, xl, 425), blank pages for missing chapters, which are then supplied many pages later (IX, xviii+xix, 565–566), several pages of an elaborate Latin curse or a bawdy shaggy dog story printed side by side with – in parts deliberately misleading – English translations (III, xi, 154–163; IV, i, 219–226), and an abundant use of dashes, asterisks and other typographical peculiarities. Moreover, in precaution against pirated editions, Sterne personally signed every copy of the second edition of volumes V and VI and of the first edition of volumes VII and VIII, making a total of 12,750 signed copies (for an excellent short account of "*Tristram Shandy* as an Aesthetic Object", see de Voogd 2006). Modern readers will be struck by the constant – frequently hostile – interaction between the autodiegetic narrator and a number of individualized readers – "Madam", "Sir Critic" and others – imagined to be physically present in the act of narration. As a further curiosity, the publication in five instalments over a period of eight years made possible direct references to the text's own reception in the later volumes. What clearly contributed to the success of *Tristram Shandy* is its cast of uniquely eccentric characters. In addition to the highly self-conscious protagonist-narrator himself, these are primarily the two Shandy brothers: crazed fanatical lay scientist Walter Shandy with his nonsensical theories on the need for a feet-first delivery of babies to relieve pressure on the brain, the importance of Christian names, noses, or education; as well as Uncle Toby, benevolent man of feeling *and* obsessive militarist, who seeks to overcome the trauma of a war wound in his "groin" – received during the 1695 siege of Namur in the Nine Years' War – by restaging the battle in an increasingly refined scaled model of the battle field in his brother's vegetable garden. Finally, the text is characterized by innumerable bawdy references, allusions and suggestions, which – given Sterne's role as a man of the church – surely contributed to the early reception of *Tristram Shandy* as something of a *succès de scandale*.

2 Thematic Concerns – Narrative and Aesthetic Strategies

More than with most novels, the characteristic narrative and aesthetic strategies of *Tristram Shandy* – the apparent formlessness and the highly digressive style as well as the consistent games with various levels of time – are inseparable from and in fact the direct result of the text's key thematic concerns: (1) the novel's critique of Enlightenment notions of science and progress; (2) the apparently so 'post-modern' narrative games with time and the limits of narrative representation; (3) the metafictional narrative techniques and strategies, including the staging of the narrator's war with his readers as a dismantling of contemporary moral philosophy with its exuberant optimism about human nature and universal benevolence; and (4) the problematization of history and historiography.

According to the logic of the novel, these key thematic concerns are closely related and in fact partly result from each other: Tristram is the victim of his father's scientific endeavours (critique of science) and, as a form of compensation, hopes for friendship with the readers, who fail to live up to expectations of benevolent interaction (critique of contemporary moral philosophy and sentimentalism): his response is a complication of his narrative in order to defend himself (reaction against eighteenth-century linear concepts of time); finally, the self-conscious reflections on the problems of historical representation subtly pick up early traces of a crisis in Enlightenment historiography.

2.1 *Tristram Shandy* and the Critique of Enlightenment Views of Science and Progress

In a letter to his publisher, Sterne described the point of volumes I and II as follows: "The Plan, as you will perceive, is a most extensive one, – taking in, not only, the Weak part of the sciences, in which the true point of ridicule lies – but every Thing else, which I find Laugh-at-able in my way" (1967, 74). Judging from *Tristram Shandy*, it seems that the "Weak part of the sciences" for Sterne included unfounded hypothesizing, the clash between theory and practice, but also the pragmatist belief in the ability of humans to interfere with the course of nature in order to improve the *condition humaine* – an optimistic notion that was of course widespread during the Enlightenment, as was the concomitant belief in reason, experience, progress and the benefits of science. It is not least this complex of ideas that *Tristram Shandy* engages with (for a contextualization of *Tristram Shandy* in this light, see Gurr 1999).

Walter Shandy embodies the novel's criticism of science: His theories and hypotheses frequently suffer from a fallacious formalization of reason and from an intellectually totalitarian distortion of facts to fit the system: "[H]e was systematical, and, like all systematick reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture every thing in nature to support his hypothesis" (I, xix, 49).[1] This description of Walter's epistemological tyranny is repeated near the very end of the novel when Tristram writes: "My father['s] way was to force every event in nature into an hypothesis, by which means never man crucified TRUTH at the rate he did" (IX, xxxii, 586; see also II, xix, 129–132). The objects of his father's scientific interest are not perceived individually, but merely quantitatively; they are indiscriminately forced upon his epistemological Bed of Procrustes. He is a totalitarian thinker:

> For God's sake, my uncle *Toby* would cry, [. . .] how can you have so little feeling and compassion for the character of our family: – What is the character of a family to an hypothesis? my father would reply. – Nay, if you come to that – what is the life of a family: [. . .] How many thousands of 'em are there every year that come cast away, (in all civilized countries at least) – and consider'd as nothing but common air, in competition of an hypothesis. In my plain sense of things, my uncle *Toby*, would answer, – every such instance is downright MURDER, let who will commit it. – There lies your mistake, my father would reply; – for in *Foro Scientiae* there is no such thing as MURDER, – 'tis only DEATH, brother. (I, xxi, 61)

Similarly, when Walter outlines his theory of the auxiliary verb and its role in education, Toby points to the potentially disastrous consequences of Walter's instrumentalizing and uncritical form of 'doing science': "The force of this engine, added my father, is incredible in opening a child's head. – 'Tis enough, brother *Shandy*, cried my uncle *Toby*, to burst it into a thousand splinters" (VI, ii, 370).

Furthermore, Walter is indifferent to the potentially disastrous effects of his theories when put into practice, as his employment of Dr. Slop for a dangerously nonsensical experiment in the birth of his own child drastically demonstrates. He proposes a Caesarean section to his wife in order to bring his son into the world, cerebellum unsqueezed (II, xix, 133), an operation which until well into the nineteenth century was almost always fatal to the mother (a Caesarean at this time was generally only used as a last resort to save a child if the mother died during childbirth). Thus, Walter attempts to interfere with the course of nature in order to improve upon it. His study of natural phenomena is not disinterested science but is always designed to be implemented directly for an alleged benefit – and ignorant of potentially fateful consequences. Various examples show how Walter's hypotheses fail to account for the facts and are either non- or counterproductive: Walter's version of rationality, of pseudo-Enlightenment, fails, because he overlooks the dangers of formalized reason.

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[1] References to *Tristram Shandy* will be by volume, chapter and page number in the widely accessible Penguin edition ed. by Melvyn New and Joan New, which is based on the definitive three-volume Florida edition.

2.2 Narrative Games with Time: *Tristram Shandy* and Eighteenth-Century Notions of Chronology and Linearity

Sterne's narrator Tristram Shandy employs an obtrusively non-linear, achronological and highly self-reflexive narrative technique that blurs several levels of time in the novel. The first is the time of the primary action around Tristram's birth in the year 1718 with frequent prolepses and flashbacks to the history of his family and to later events in his own life. The second time level is that of Tristram's alleged composition of his work between the years 1759 and 1767, which is synchronized with the actual time of composition of Sterne's novel. The third level is that of the time of reading, which comes into play by means of the readers or listeners inscribed into the novel, both in the sense of their reading the novel over a period of several years as the volumes appeared successively, and in references to the time it might take them to read a passage or chapter. One of the central narrative strategies of the novel is to blur these levels and to upset expectations about chronology and the linearity of the reading process (see also Henke 2002, 92): Tristram sends an inattentive reader back to an earlier chapter (I, xx, 51–52), leaves out two chapters and delivers them later (IX, xvii, 565; IX, xxv, 575), or leaves a chapter out entirely (IV, xxv, 282). The preface only appears in book III, which Tristram justifies by arguing that, because all his characters are busy, he now has time to compose it (III, xx, 173). Elsewhere, Tristram interrupts the report of a conversation between his father and his uncle in mid-sentence only to continue it just as suddenly some thirty pages later (I, xxi, 56; II, vi, 88). A further instance of playing with chronology occurs when the narrator decides to leave his father in bed for half an hour and to use this time to give an account of other events (III, xxx, 195), only to tell us fourteen pages later that the turbulent events have forced him to narrate for 35 minutes already, so that he now has "five minutes less, than no time at all" (III, xxxviii, 212) to narrate the remaining essential events before returning to his father. But the most consistent form of upsetting expectations about chronology is the highly digressive narrative technique of the text itself, which compulsively enters into the most minute details and backgrounds of every episode to be narrated and thus constantly lags behind the progress of events themselves (see, for example, IV, xiii, 257).

This refusal to conform to expectations of chronology and linearity leads to a self-conscious metafictional problematization of the process of narration itself that appears to anticipate twentieth-century techniques of modernist and postmodernist fiction. This engagement with chronology, however, can be tied back to eighteenth-century concerns. Thus, Parker reads the consistently non-linear narrative as a reaction to the predominantly linear and progressive thought of the time, more specifically as "deliberate resistance to the determinism of Newtonian science to which the great narratives of the mid-eighteenth century conform" (Parker 1997, 103). But it is not only Newtonian science that is critically questioned here: the novel becomes a reaction to such notions of time in a much more general sense if one bears in mind that the mid-eighteenth century was marked by a linear and progressive understanding of time in many diverse fields of knowledge, just as everyday life and work in the eighteenth century were influenced in an unprecedented way by the clock (see Wendorff 1980, 253–337). Buffon and Linné developed early conceptions of an evolutionary development of species towards higher forms of life, a sense that easily dovetails with the idea of progress as it also shaped the understanding of human society and culture. *Tristram Shandy* is full of ironic references to such optimistic assumptions about a linear course of history, a development of society towards a better, higher state, and about individual and collective perfectibility:

> [B]y slow steps of casual increase [. . .] our knowledge physical, metaphysical, physiological, polemical, nautical, mathematical, ænigmatical, technical, biographical, romantical, chemical, and obstetrical, with fifty other branches of it, (most of 'em ending, as these do, in *ical*) have, for these last two centuries and more, gradually been creeping upwards towards that *Ακμῆ* of their perfections, from which, if we may form a conjecture from the advances of these last seven years, we cannot possibly be far off. (I, xxi, 57)

Sterne's narrative strategies consistently disturb the received contemporary notion of time as linear and thus counter Newtonian notions of predictability and calculability. Thus, the astonishingly postmodern 'feel' of his text is ultimately the result of a critical engagement with eighteenth-century discourses and assumptions. It is important to note, however, that despite its seeming formlessness and the chaotic reading experience of *Tristram Shandy*, critics have pointed out "a systematic time scheme of almost flawless coherence" underlying the text (Keymer 2009, 8; for the time scheme and the games with time, see Baird 1936; Henke 2002; Gurr 2006a). After a painstaking reconstruction of the chronology underlying Sterne's fiction, Baird – much against the overwhelming reading impression of readers in over 260 years – even asserted that "*Tristram Shandy,* far from being a wild and whimsical work, is an exactly executed historical novel" (1936, 819).

2.3 Sterne's Critique of Sentimentalism and Tristram's War against His Readers

Tristram himself refers to Locke's notion of the "association of ideas" to account for the associative and digressive nature of his narrative (I, iv, 9; for this see especially Cash 1955 and the notes in the Florida edition). However, the novel's style also corresponds with Sterne's critique of a further branch of contemporary philosophical optimism. Sentimental optimism about human nature and early reflections on the limits of tolerance are two key intellectual contexts of *Tristram Shandy*, and can be found in Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* (1711), Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1740) and the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), and others [↗ 2 The Novel and Sense(s)]. Arguably the most enthusiastic celebrator of benevolence, compassion and the natural goodness of human nature was Francis Hutcheson, particularly in his *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725):

> The *human Nature* is a lovely Form. [. . .] I see no harm in supposing, that Men are *naturally* dispos'd to *Virtue*. [. . .] *Human Nature* seems scarce capable of *malicious disinterested Hatred*. [T]here is a *universal Determination* to *Benevolence* in *Mankind*, even toward the most distant parts of the species [. . .] [A]nother Determination of our *Mind*, which strongly proves *Benevolence* to be *natural* to us [. . .] is COMPASSION; by which we are dispos'd to study the *Interest* of others, without any view to private Advantage. (Hutcheson 1971, 131–132, 195, 215–216; emphases in the original)

This widespread optimism is also reflected in a vast number of literary texts of the period, the "man of feeling" in the novel only being one tradition in this vein (see Keymer 2009). Another example would be Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), which celebrates

> the exalted pleasure that flows from the reflection of having had it put into one's power to administer comfort and relief to those who stand in need of it. A pleasure which of itself infinitely rewards the beneficent mind, were there to be no after account at all! (1980, 388–389)

This tradition is satirized on several levels of Sterne's text. Tristram's Uncle Toby, whose "unparallel'd modesty of nature" is shown to be the result of the war wound in his "groin" (I, xxi, 59–60), is often read as an emblem of the sentimental man of feeling (see his celebrated kindness with an annoying fly, II, xii, 100). However, his character is more plausibly regarded as a critique of sentimentalism; if a war wound in the groin is the price to be paid for kindness of character, that price, the text ironically suggests, is too high!

On a more elaborate level, the optimism of contemporary moral philosophy is satirized in the relationship between the narrator and his readers. In any reading of *Tristram Shandy*, it is important to understand the fiction of the narrator Tristram's constant interaction with a number of readers imagined to be present, to whom he repeatedly explains his narrative techniques, whom he asks for their understanding in case of delays or with whom he begins to quarrel. These readers, it must be noted, according to the fictitious situation of communication of the novel, are not the products of Tristram's imagination but are posited by the 'real' author Laurence Sterne as being on the same level of fictitiousness as Tristram himself (see Gurr 1999, 89–95).

Having been, as we learn throughout the novel, the victim both of his father's theories applied and his uncle's military games (see for instance the sash-window accident in V, xvii, 339–341), Tristram now pins his hopes on his success as an author:

> [T]he book shall make its way in the world, much better than its master has done before it – Oh *Tristram*! *Tristram*! can this but be once brought about – the credit, which will attend thee as an author, shall counterbalance the many evils which have befallen thee as a man – thou wilt feast upon one – when thou hast lost all sense and remembrance of the other! (IV, xxxii, 302–303)

Near the beginning of the book, Tristram repeatedly declares his intention benevolently and openly to communicate with his readers, believing in their intellectual capacity and willingness to do so. He offers them an intelligent, non-hierarchical, enlightened discourse on equal terms: "As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship" (I, vi, 11; see also II, xi, 96).

This *caveat* "unless one of us is in fault" will prove to be very important. For as we and Tristram all too soon perceive, one side is in fault indeed: Tristram's readers are positively malevolent. He is frequently interrupted; the readers' ignorance and unwillingness to go along are all too apparent. They repeatedly attempt to remodel Tristram's narration to their own voyeuristic tastes. Tristram's complaints about this malevolence are numerous: He speaks of their "impatience" (V, xxxv, 357), "anger" (VI, xl, 426), "unsavory appellations" (IX, xxv, 575) and complains: "I cannot take a step without the danger of having either their worships or their reverences upon my back [. . .]. I count not the number of my scars, – nor does my fancy go forth into dark entries and bye corners to antedate my stabs" (VI, xvii, 394; see also III, xx, 175). This dilemma – Tristram's offer of benevolent commerce with his readers on the one hand, and their tendency to exploit his benevolence on the other – is central to the narrator's relationship with his readers.

What we learn from Tristram's readers is akin to what Mandeville had to say about the high moral optimism of Shaftesbury:

> [Shaftesbury's] notions, I confess are generous and refined: They are a high Compliment to Human-kind, and capable by the help of a little Enthusiasm of inspiring us with the most Noble Sentiments concerning the Dignity of our exalted Nature: What Pity it is that they are not true. (1924, 2:324)

Several of the characteristic digressions Tristram inserts into his narrative are parables illustrating his problem, such as the ubiquitous exploitation of benevolence, tolerance and openness. Yorick's benevolence (I, x, 17–22), for example, in selling his expensive horse and installing the midwife is malevolently mistaken and misrepresented as springing from selfish motifs; here, too, altruism is misunderstood and exploited. This also occurs in the case of King Francis of France, who confers the honour of standing godfather to his child upon the Republic of Switzerland. Rather than choosing a suitable name, Switzerland insists upon entirely inappropriate names, whereupon the King of France feels compelled to "go to war with 'em" (IV, xxi, 270). Tristram is similarly forced to defend himself against the malevolence of his readers. A further parallel is apparent in the story of John de la Casse, Bishop of Benevento, who found that

> the life of a writer, whatever he might fancy to the contrary, was not so much a state of *composition* as a state of *warfare*; and his probation in it, precisely that of any other man militant upon earth, – both depending alike, not half so much upon the degrees of his WIT – as his RESISTANCE. (V, xvi, 337; emphases in the original)

In each of these cases Tristram explicitly points to the fact that the stories or episodes have a meaning beyond the surface, that they are in fact *his* story (I, x, 21; IV; xx, 268). In Tristram's own case, an offer of benevolent, non-hierarchical, 'enlightened' discourse is revealed to backfire or to be exploited.

Toby's "apologetical oration" in defence of war restates the dilemma and already suggests a solution: "For what is war? [. . .] when fought as ours has been, upon principles of *liberty*, and upon principles of *honour* – what is it, but the getting together of quiet and harmless people, with their swords in their hands, to keep the ambitious and the turbulent within bounds?" (VI, xxxii, 416; emphases in the original). "Quiet and harmless people" – Yorick, King Francis of France, any writer according to John de la Casse, any community according to Toby, and, according to the logic of the novel, Tristram himself – have to defend themselves against the exploitation of their benevolence and tolerance (for Toby's oration and questions of warfare in *Tristram Shandy*, see Descargues 2006). The solution to his problem is the digressive method which he describes thus:

> [T]he machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too, – and at the same time. [. . .] I have constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with such intersections, and have so complicated and involved the digressive and progressive movements, one wheel within another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going [. . .]. (I, xxii, 63–64)

This narrative technique is designed to re-establish the author's control over his own narrative and "to keep the ambitious and the turbulent within bounds", as one might phrase it with Toby (VI, xxxii, 416). This narrative self-defence, however, has a curious tendency to turn into a new form of oppression. Thus, at one point Tristram virtually threatens his readers with yet another of his notorious digressions by ironically 'offering' them a fifty-page account of the siege of Calais:

> As it will not take up above fifty pages, it would be injustice to the reader, not to give him a minute account [. . .]. – But courage! gentle reader! – I scorn it – 'tis enough to have thee in my power – [I could] make use of the advantage which the fortune of my pen has gained over thee [. . .] (VII, v/vi, 437–438)

The realization that benevolence tends to be exploited leads Tristram to involve and complicate his discourse so as to defend himself. The digressive or retrogressive machinery of his work reveals this awareness and at the same time constitutes a conscious resistance against it – a self-defence, however, which is constantly in danger of turning into a new form of oppression (for a detailed discussion of the digressive style in this light, see Gurr 1999, 96–138).

2.4 *Tristram Shandy* and the Representation of History

That historiography is inescapably subjective in Tristram's narrative is already hinted at in the full title, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, *Gentleman*. The novel almost obsessively returns to questions of history and historiography: What is history? How is it 'made'? How can it be adequately narrated? To what extent is historiography necessarily individual and subjective (see also 3.2)?

Tristram Shandy repeatedly calls himself a "historiographer" or "historian", especially in one key episode, in which he attempts to explain the specific way in which he tells his story. To him, historiography appears to be even more unpredictable than the driving of a mule:

> Could a historiographer drive on his history, as a muleteer drives on his mule, – straight forward; – for instance, from *Rome* all the way to *Loretto*, without ever once turning his head aside either to the right hand or to the left, – he might venture to foretell you to an hour when he should get to his journey's end; – but the thing is, morally speaking, impossible: For, if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid [. . .] he will moreover have various Accounts to reconcile: Anecdotes to pick up: [. . .] Stories to weave in: Traditions to sift [. . .] there are archives at every stage to be look'd into, and rolls, records, documents, and endless genealogies, which justice ever and anon calls him back to stay the reading of: – In short, there is no end of it. (I, xiv, 34–35)

It is obvious that a work of historiography composed in this way will to an uncomfortably great extent be dependent on the conditions prevalent during its production and can hardly be an 'objective', 'authentic' or 'true' account. The creation of contingency and haphazardness in 'history' through the process of historiography is beautifully and drastically rendered here.

3 Reception and Theoretical Perspectives

Keymer appropriately commented on the "hospitality of *Tristram Shandy* to different approaches and divergent readings" (2009, 3), and there is hardly any other novel which has been read from such diverse critical perspectives and thematic concerns. Sterne's text has engaged scholars with interests in philology, poststructuralism, postmodernity and narrative indeterminacy (Lamb 1989), in feminism, gender studies, or queer studies (Hardin 1999; Harries 2009; Wiehe 2017), in actor-network theory and object-oriented ontologies (Lupton 2017), in visual culture, seriality, or celebrity culture (de Voogd 2006; Keymer 2016), in medical history, trauma theory or disability studies (Landers 2017; Wiehe 2017), postcolonial studies (Wehrs 2009), political history (Havard 2014), political theory and the theory of democracy (Gurr 1999), in military history, pacifism and conflict theory (Descargues 2006), the philosophy of law (de Sutter

2011), in (post-)Marxism and the critique of mass culture (Gurr 1999), in the theory of science, mobility and its technologies (Drury 2017), theology (Stewart 2005), and more. Some readings have sought to historicize their concerns, while others have been remarkably indifferent to the novel's historical context.

One of the central issues in criticism of *Tristram Shandy* has been that of its placement in the history of genre and in intellectual history. Is it a novel, a romance, a satirical comedy, a work of speculative philosophy? Is it a regressive text schooled in and harking back to Renaissance wit or early eighteenth-century satire? Or is it a "postmodern classic written way before there was any modernism to be 'post' about", as one of the characters in Michael Winterbottom's 2006 highly self-reflexive film adaptation *A Cock and Bull Story* has it? (For discussions of these traditions, see Gurr 1999; Hawley 2009; Hawley 2017; Keymer 2006; for a discussion of the film version, see Romney 2006.)

Keymer rightly – if somewhat schematically – states that "[t]the fashion for reading *Tristram Shandy* as a proleptic demonstration of modern intellectual systems [. . .] has now receded" in favour of a more "rigorously historicized body of criticism" that has sought to read Sterne in the light of key intellectual traditions and contexts (2006, 14–15). Similarly, J.T. Parnell has argued:

> It may [. . .] be a hard pill to swallow to accept that such a marvellous book as *Tristram Shandy* can have been written from a conservative, not to say reactionary perspective and that it is a satire (with all that the generic distinction implies) and not a postmodern novel. [. . .] It is surely, in part, our desire to use texts to confirm current theoretical orthodoxies which prevents us from acknowledging them to be informed by worldviews uncongenial to our own. (2006, 45–46)

Closer contextualization of Sterne's work in the tradition of Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, Cervantes, Robert Burton and Swift as well as a contextualization in eighteenth-century fiction indeed makes Sterne look distinctly less like a postmodernist *avant la lettre* (for such contextualizations see Wehrs 1988; Parnell 2006; Folkenflik 2006). Interestingly, Judith Hawley has drawn attention to Sterne's Cambridge education (1733–1737) "during a time of curricular transition", which may account for the curious combination of the "dustily scholastic" with the "cutting edge" that readers have – often very selectively – seen in *Tristram Shandy* (2009, 40).

Sterne still appeals both to critics with interests in philology and literary history *and* to more theoretically inclined scholars. While Rachel Ramsey (2009) has read Tristram's accidental circumcision (or worse?) by the falling sash window as part of a "Literary History of the Sash Window", Christina Lupton, in a recent attempt at "Reading Sterne with Bruno Latour" (2017), has deployed Sterne's text to point to the limits of applying object-oriented ontologies to literary texts and has thus effectively read Sterne *against* Latour. And while Elizabeth W. Harries (2009) discusses the representation of gender roles and Sterne's portrayal of women, Bowden and Kraft recognize his suitability to a digital environment without having to be anachronistic: "In his interweaving of the visual and the textual [. . .] Sterne anticipates the possibilities offered to us in the digital world" (2016, 139).

On the one hand, a good number of readings, especially since the 1970s, have thus indeed been anachronistic, wresting Sterne's text from its contemporary contexts and its place in literary history to read it as an example or anticipation of present-day concerns. On the other hand, many of the more rigorously historicizing analyses since the 1990s, especially those which read Sterne as a provincial conservative in the satirical tradition of Swift and his forebears, hardly do justice to the apparent modernity of *Tristram Shandy*. As a number of scholars have shown, however, *Tristram Shandy* uniquely lends itself to demonstrating that these two traditions by no means have to be mutually exclusive (see Harries 1982; Wehrs 1988; Parker 1997; Gurr 1999; Gurr 2006a; Gurr 2006b). Readings that firmly situate Sterne in the context of eighteenth-century intellectual concerns *can* at the same time show his undeniable modernity, which has so strongly appealed both to an astonishing range of key writers at different times and in very different cultural contexts and – though *Tristram Shandy* is *now* hardly a book widely read outside academic and literary circles – to very diverse readers for over 250 years.

Thus, Sterne's critique of Enlightenment scientific optimism can be firmly located in contemporary debates, but it can also be read as foreshadowing twentieth-century concerns about potentially totalitarian abuses of science with writers such as Aldous Huxley or Horkheimer/Adorno's classic *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (for a detailed discussion, see Gurr 1999, 57–84; see also Gurr 2006b). The same is true of applied readings of Toby's military endeavours and Tristram's war against his readers, which have been viewed in the light of twentieth-century concerns about limits of tolerance, the 'open society and its enemies' (*sensu* Popper), different notions of a 'muscular democracy' and the thin line between self-defence and oppression (see Descargues 2006; Gurr 1999, 89–149). Read in this light, in its representation of the potential dangers and downsides of Enlightenment conceptions of reason, science and progress, *Tristram Shandy* appears to approximate Lichtenberg's insightful, almost prophetic remark of some 25 years later: "As a symbol for the Enlightenment, I would like to suggest the common symbol for fire (Δ). It gives light and warmth, it is indispensable for the growth and progress of everything that lives, yet – handled carelessly, it burns and destroys" (Lichtenberg 1968, 790; author's translation).

As far as Sterne's complication of time and temporal succession and the subversion of linearity and predictability are concerned, they can also be shown to respond to eighteenth-century debates, even as they have been read in connection with twentieth- and twenty-first-century concepts in the theory of non-linear dynamics (a.k.a. 'chaos theory') and the theory of complexity (see Parker 1997; Sim 2001).

Finally, Sterne's exploration of historiography and its limits lends itself to being read in the light of twentieth-century concerns in the theory of historiography. To what degree can historiography be regarded as a 'true' *reconstruction* of history, for example, and to what extent is it necessarily and inherently a narrative *construction* which has rather a lot in common with the writing of fiction? Hayden White's work in particular has explored the overlap between historiography and fiction: both use language to represent human experience; both are necessarily narrative; they are selective; they cannot help using figurative language; and the choices made by the historian are time-bound and are inescapably influenced by an author's conscious or unconscious personal, ideological, political preferences, assumptions and convictions (see White 1973; White 1987 as well as de Certeau 1988). In this light, Stuart Peterfreund has read *Tristram Shandy* in the context of the "crisis in late Enlightenment historical thinking" (1981, 25), which White diagnosed in *Metahistory*. Paraphrasing White, Peterfreund argues that the later Enlightenment – White names Hume, Gibbon and Kant – understood that historiography could never capture 'historical truth' as such and would therefore necessarily have to take the form of "self-reflexive fiction" (1981, 26). Thus, what *Tristram Shandy* perceptively stages is the very modern insight that history is 'produced': History as the object of historiography is not a reconstruction, but a construction (see also Gurr 2006a).[2]

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[2] Sections 2 and 3 of this essay draw on Gurr 1999 and Gurr 2006a/b and substantially reuse material especially from 2006a and 2006b.

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