

Taking a Measure of Laurence Sterne as a Poetic Novelist

Oh Life! Life! What a whim thou art? Thou art a perfect Evander, - no body knows what to make of thee; - Thou art one tedious Ramble from nothing to something, tho that something is next to nothing – Life is a troubled, troublesom, and temptuous Sea, a mere Irish Ocean, we take Shipping at our Birth, with tears we sail over it; with Care, Fear, Sorrow, Hope, (sometimes worse than all the other three,) the Whirlwinds that blow us thro it, and at last with sighs and Groans, we land at the Port of Death.¹

This is not by the hand of Laurence Sterne but by one with whom he shares many affinities, John Dunton (1695-1733). Like Sterne, Dunton had an acute sense of the ‘pitiful misadventures and cross accidents’² that can beset a man as he travels from birth to death. Dunton also prefigures Sterne with a curious mixture of ‘sad Melancholy pleasure’³ and manic humour that disguises an uncomfortable awareness of suffering. Yet despite all the similarities between John Dunton’s *Voyage Round the World* and *Tristram Shandy*, and there are many, there remains one glaring difference which is largely responsible for the fact that one author has sunken into near oblivion while the other has never been moved off center stage. This difference, to evoke Scott’s dictum on the successful novelist, lies in the depth and complexity in Stern’s approach to the human condition – a depth and complexity that makes Sterne, along with James Joyce, the most poetic of novelists writing in English.

Writing to his fellow Scot, Tobias Smollett, Sir Walter Scott offers his opinion on what constitutes a novelist of quality, which one assumes is what he meant by a ‘successful novelist’:

Every successful novelist must be more or less a poet, even although he may never have written a line of verse. The quality of imagination is absolutely indispensable to him: his accurate power of examining and embodying human character and human passion, as well as the external face of nature, is not less essential; and the talent of describing well what he feels with acuteness, added to the above requisites, goes far to complete the poetic character.⁴

Scott is requiring of the novelist what the Romantics generally require of a poet, a ‘profusion of imagination’ that bodies forth ‘force and individuality of character’⁵ with a spontaneousness, or what Scott calls ‘carelessness’⁶, of expression that leads to a simple but potent evocation of experience. Turning his attention to Sterne, Scott discerns a strong imagination labouring under the constrictions of affectation, indecency, plagiarism, and eccentricity. To Scott, these impede and obscure Sterne’s real virtues of originality,

characterization that radiates ‘pleasing force and discrimination’⁷, and his unmatched ability to touch ‘the finer feelings of the heart.’⁸ Assessing Sterne’s merits becomes something of a riddle for Scott with Sterne embracing two extremes as:

one of the most affected, and one of the most simple writers, - as one of the greatest plagiarists, and one of the most original geniuses, whom England has produced.⁹

Scott’s conviction that a poetic virtue of sincerity is important in a novelist opens the slippery issue of how one should respond to Sterne’s creations; it is one issue all readers must confront.

William Makepeace Thackeray is not alone in finding the mixture of contraries in Sterne annoying or in asking:

How much was deliberate calculation and imposture – how much was false sensibility – and how much true feeling? Where did the lie begin, and did he know where? and where did the truth end in the art and scheme of this man of genius, this actor, this quack?¹⁰

Thackeray is unnerved by the fact that when he looks into the pages of Sterne he finds Sterne staring right back out at him and Thackeray picks up on the element of anxiety in Sterne’s prose as it seems to struggle, as a juggler might, to keep a number of balls in the air at once:

He is always looking in my face, watching his effect, uncertain whether I think him an imposter or not; posture-making, coaxing, and imploring me¹¹

Despite repeated attempts by critical theorists to banish this kind of intentionality from criticism, it cannot be chased out of the reader’s experience. Thackeray’s response is neither insensitive nor irrelevant and the issue of disingenuousness in Sterne must be dealt with because even a whiff of dishonesty sours a reader’s enjoyment of poetry, and Scott is not alone in this predisposition. The problem then, for both Scott and Thackeray, reduces to an assessment of how to distinguish the dimension of sincerity in Sterne from his affectation, strained eccentricity and willful truancy from the social mores of his day. Taking the issue further, one must pursue the question of how, if at all, the former virtue can explain and ameliorate the latter transgressions. Herein lies the answer to Thackeray’s questions and Scott’s reservations, and with that the poetic merit of Sterne’s prose.

Amid the ongoing celebration of Sterne and *Tristram Shandy*, John Hinxman, a bookseller from York who had recently moved shop to London, saw a chance to temper the

praises of Sterne's originality and to cash in upon it at the same time. Either he, or the unnamed Editor, came across a copy of John Dunton's *Voyage Round the World* and noted the many similarities it bore to *Tristram Shandy*. So with a good deal of new material, that feebly imitates Sterne and a fair amount of sanitizing. John Dunton's work reappeared under the title of *The Life, and Adventures of Christopher Wagstaff, Gentlemen, Grandfather to Tristram Shandy* (1762). Arthur Cash argues that this is a new work owing little to Dunton but this is incorrect as the bulk of Dunton's single volume is in fact used, even if it becomes almost unrecognizable in places as the editor removes Dunton's endearing grit.¹² The grounds for linking the two authors can be grouped under five particulars, according to the Editor, to which one can add a sixth without difficulty. They share a common 'stile ... and humour of expression,' and both begin their autobiographic fictions before birth, though Dunton goes somewhat further back than does Sterne – to six thousand years before his conception. Both make apostrophes to a female, Jenny for Tristram and Iris for Dunton's Evander. And both intermix 'moral and serious matter with the most ludicrous incidents' and indulge in the same 'method of protraction, or act of continuation, whereby either performance might be lengthened out to the reader's patience, or author's imagination.'¹³ One additional link between Dunton and Sterne, which escapes the Editor, can serve as the single example.

Dunton's *Voyage Around the World* is governed by the motif of rambling, the unquenchable need for motion, experience and discussion which characterizes life itself as well as the character of the author:

He's a thing wholly consisting of Extrems – A Head, Fingers and Toes; for what his industrious Toes do tread, his ready Fingers do write, his running Head dictating¹⁴

His rambling mind and rambling limbs soon come to characterize his pen and page, and the resulting style and structure of his records embodies a rambling spirit that shares more than a passing resemblance to Shandeism:

All his Discourse is shap'd into a Traveling Garb, and is the same with his Manners and Haviour, looking as if 'twas contriv'd to make Mourners merry¹⁵

So to 'make Mourners merry' Dunton records his rambles through the character of Kainophilus Evander, vilifying all obstacles such as schoolmasters and apprentice

indentures, and capturing every passing detail with a busy eye. The volume concludes with a delightful ramble through the metropolis after which he cries out:

O London, London! If thou are not one Sodom and Gomorrha, thou yet com'st pretty near it¹⁶

Dunton deserves to be read because his prose emits the same irrepressibility that characterizes his life as a bookseller who tasted success during the 1690s only to sink into penury.¹⁷ Yet there remains no mystery why Dunton has faded into history while Sterne remains popular reading. By the end of the 158 small pages of Dunton's book, the reader is exhausted and glad to have reached a safe harbour. There is very little variation or depth in Dunton, as he manages with frenetic energy to maintain a breakneck pace of questions, pronouncements, descriptions and decisions.¹⁸ There is something missing from Dunton that prevents a similar pace in Sterne from having this same effect and it may be summarized as Sterne's deeper appreciation of the problems of coping with the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.'¹⁹

The reference to *Hamlet* is no accident because Sterne found something so germane to his needs in Hamlet's speech over a court jester's skull that he took up Yorick as a personal model and a professional mask. This is a helpful sidelight upon Sterne's habit, as Tristram, of donning a 'fool's cap with a bell' (I, vi, 10) to divert his reader. Yorick's task as jester was, to use Dunton's words, to 'make Mourners merry.' Hamlet's famous oration is crucial to understanding Sterne's mask and his general understanding of human personalities:

Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio – a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred my imagination is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chopfallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that.²⁰

Melancholy reflection gives way as Hamlet recalls his beloved jester and recognizes the wisdom of laughter as a means of holding off the immobilizing fear which death strikes into all living creatures. Even in the grave, Yorick has shown Hamlet the value of a joke and the lesson is not lost on the prince:

Dost though think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth? ...And Smelt so?
Pah!²¹

With this joke Hamlet throws down the skull, bolsters his spirits and moves into the realm of action. It is a means of dealing with death that Sterne had to rely upon as his health was never strong and, after his student days, a constant concern. Yorick's philosophy became the main line of Sterne's psychological defense against the tuberculosis that was gradually killing him:

when Death himself knocked at my door – ye bad him come again; and in so gay a tone of careless indifference, did ye do it, that he doubted his commission (VII, i, 385)

The effort is to hoodwink death and to chase off melancholia. With this achieved, there are then the shocks and injuries to be absorbed as part of life and this is the origin of the idea of hobby-horses.

Hobby-horses in Sterne basically refer to pastimes or habits but the underlying meaning of 'prostitute' suggests an avenue wherein fundamental needs and requirements can be satisfied. Sterne fuses the trivial and the serious connotations of hobby-horses to create a powerful means of understanding human behaviour. To explain the nature of hobby-horses, Sterne looks deep into the mind and uses the physiology of hollow nerves and animal spirits; these animal spirits:

when they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a halfpenny matter, -- away they go clattering like hey-go-mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which, when they are once used to, the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it (I, i, 5)

This internal process has clear manifestations in behaviour as pastimes become invested with an inordinant importance and become the external crutches for internal stability.

Before long, person and pastime are nearly inseparable:

by means of the heated parts of the rider, which come immediately into contact with the back of the Hobby-Horse. – By long journies and much friction, it so happens that the body of the rider is at length fill'd as full of Hobby-Horsical matter as it can hold; - so that if you are able to give but a clear description of the nature of the one, you may form a pretty exact notion of the genius and character of the other (I, xxiv, 61)

All people, 'not excepting Solomon himself' (I, vii, 12), have their hobby-horses as an external adjunct to their personalities. The nature of these hobby-horses and their purpose provide Sterne with a means of self-dramatization, characterization and plot organization.

The most famous of the hobby-horses is that of kindly Uncle Toby, which comes to physically dominate the landscape around Shandy Hall. The roots of this particular hobby-horse stretch back to a wound Toby had received at the siege of Namur. While he was recovering, he was confronted with a stream of well-wishers brought to his bedside by his well-meaning brother. Each set of visitors, upon seeing no obvious bandages, would ask where he was wounded. For much of the book the wound is vaguely located 'upon his groin' (II, i, 68), which suggests emasculation, though it is later revealed to be more toward the hip (IX, xxvii, 532). In either case, Toby's natural bashfulness will not allow him to mention where on his body he was injured. The question being posed, however, some expedient was required so he would reinterpret the question as where, on the battlefield, did he receive his injury and proceed to lose his inquisitors in a flurry of details and the excitement of the battle retold by one who was there. This would have worked better if Toby had been more quick-witted or less flustered for he 'did oft times puzzle his visitors; and sometimes himself too' (II, I, 67). The solution was a map of the battle area and this 'not only freed him from a world of sad explanations, but, in the end, it prov'd the happy means, as you will read, of procuring my uncle Toby his HOBBY-HORSE' (II, I, 69). In just this same way, each character in *Tristram Shandy* has his or her peculiar way of pleasing themselves, handling others and influencing events.

The action of *Tristram Shandy*, if one can call it that, originates in the interaction of various hobby-horses and any particular event can be traced back to one or more 'Hobby-Horsical' (I, xxiv, 61) causes. The obvious example is the series of mishaps that attend the birth of Tristram. For one, he is conceived under the dictates of his father's humorously mechanical approach to life and he is bequeathed nervous disorder when a lapse in the monthly routine is pointed out by his mother at a crucial moment. He is then born in the country, as opposed to a more fashionable (and more dangerous) lying-in hospital in the city, because his father stringently enforces his appendix to his wife's marriage indenture. A bungling country quack, Dr. Slop is summoned as part of Walter Shandy's larger prescriptive philosophy. Dr. Slop's half-informed dedication to contemporary medical

advances leads to the destruction of Tristram's nose. The local midwife has her profession thanks to Parson's Yorick's passion for expensive horses. The lines of causality spread through the novel in a similar fashion and every character becomes bound to every other by some hobby-horsical link. Even the harmless Toby contributes to Tristram's dire lot in life when the young boy is circumcised, and nearly emasculated, by a sash-window, the lead weights from which had been removed to supply materials for Toby's bowling-green battlefield.

It is the points of contact between hobby-horses and between hobby-horses and uncomfortable reality that become Sterne's major interest and this gives his work the bedrock of genuine humanity that redeems every excess. Walter Shandy deals with life by means of his acquired knowledge, powers of disputation and the resulting opinions. 'Learned men' he informs his brother Toby, 'don't write dialogues upon long noses for nothing' (III, xxxvii, 183) and accordingly he has strong views on the importance of a well-formed nose. His hobby-horse is thrown into crisis when his son's nose is crushed by Dr. Slop's forceps. He receives the news with silence, unable for the moment to assimilate so blatant a contradiction of his hopes, and he turns to his brother for support:

-- Lead me, brother Toby, cried my father, to my room this instant (III, xxvii, 170)

In the rupture of his abilities to explain his experience he must rely upon his brother's unflinching affections. The same thing occurs when his son is not named Trismegistus, Walter's considered choice, but Tristram a name he had long since discounted as a 'Melancholy dissyllable of sound!' (I, xix, 47). The scene is a masterpiece of timing:

And what's the matter, Susannah? They have called the child Tristram – and my mistress is just got out of an hysterick fit about it – No! – 'tis not my fault, said Susannah – I told him it was Tristram-gistus.

Again there is silence.

-- Make tea for yourself, brother Toby, said my father, taking down his hat (IV, xvi, 232)

Deep in Walter's mind, or perhaps his heart, the breakdown of his mental hobby-horse is supplanted by the presence of a loving brother. Through these glimpses, one sees the bond of love between Walter and Toby which survives even head-on collisions between their respective hobby-horses. When Walter pits his knowledge of ancient warfare against

Toby's affinity for its modern arts, Toby knows better than to oppose his more verbose brother:

My uncle Toby would never attempt any defence against the force of this ridicule, but that of redoubling the vehemence of smoaking his pipe; in doing which, he raised so dense a vapour one night after supper, that it set my father, who was a little phthisical, into a suffocating fit of violent coughing: my uncle Toby leap'd up without feeling the pain upon his groin, - and, with infinite pity, stood beside his brothers chair, tapping his back with one hand, and holding his head with the other, and from time to time, wiping his eyes with a clean cambrick handkerchief, which he pull'ed out of his pocket (III, xxiv, 167-8)

The conflict resolves into loving contact, and it is important to note, loving physical contact. Both injuries and hobby-horses momentarily vanish when the true support of their lives exerts itself. Besides Tristram's need to write, the two most important hobby-horses are those Walter and Toby, and each receives one serious shock. For Walter, it is the death of Bobby, his son, and for Toby it is the amorous inquiries of Mrs. Wadman. The first shows a hobby-horse in complete disarray after a fundamental human link is ruptured and the second hobby-horse impeding the establishment of a new, and potentially productive, bond. Both spectacles produce an undercurrent of pathos that balances Tristram's buoyant humour.

When the letter arrives announcing Bobby's death it is Toby who reads it and must break the news to Walter. Rather than the silence with which he responded to the smaller shocks involving a nose and a name, Walter struggles in vain to lose himself in his learning but the effect is pathetic confusion:

Philosophy has a fine saying for everything. – For Death it has an entire set; the misery was, they all at once rushed into my father's head, that 'twas difficult to strong them together, so as to make anything of a consistent show of them. – He took them as they came (V, iii, 283)

Given Walter's usual eloquence, this betrays the scale of injury. Toby can sense the pain and desperately wants to help but must sit 'praying silently for my father, with tears in his eyes' (V, iii, 285) after his brother 'taking him by the hand' asks 'do not – do not, I beseech thee, interrupt me at this crisis' (V, iii, 284). Toby understands that the best way to support his brother is to encourage a learned discussion, something he normally avoids, and thereby repair a broken hobby-horse. The death sends a shock wave through Shandy Hall with each character responding differently. Susannah innocently avoids her grief by occupying her

mind with her mistress's wardrobe, and Trim, in the most valid handling of the news, drops his hat on the floor in a gesture of grief and a simple recognition of loss.

Walter's crisis, like Hamlet's speech on Yorick, shows how humans must deal with the fact of death. Toby's crisis points to the difficulty of achieving a positive and productive response. The episode of Mrs. Wadman places Toby back into the uncomfortable situation of fending off increasingly direct inquiries about the location of his wound. But unlike casual visitors, Mrs. Wadman has a vested interest in pursuing the matter and will not, as a result, be easily diverted. Through a series of insinuations, Mrs. Wadman comes to pose the crucial question so it can have only one meaning:

And whereabouts, dear Sir, quoth Mrs. Wadman, a little categorically, did you receive this sad blow? – In asking this question, Mrs. Wadman gave a slight glance towards the waistband of my uncle Toby's red plush breeches, expecting naturally, as the shortest reply to it, that my uncle Toby would lay his fore-finger upon the place (IX, xxvi, 529)

Toby, one fears, is in real trouble. But 'It fell out otherwise' and what is in fact shown is not the collapse of his hobby-horse but its perfection. Toby's 'sensorium' had long since learned how to handle such a crisis and his technical proficiency in locating his exact position on the battlefield where he was wounded is such that when he 'with such a virgin modesty laid her finger upon that place' Mrs. Wadman is again disappointed. Her compassion 'forbid her to explain the mistake' (IX, xxvi, 529).

On one level, this is a comic scene which offers a sense of relief in Toby's escape and an enjoyment of the distress of a mature woman frustrated in her search for physical gratification. On another level, there is much more at work here. Upon taking a closer look, one discovers that Widow Wadman's 'first husband was all his time afflicted with a Sciatica' (IX, xxvi, 528), a painful inflammation of a hip joint which could prove a discouragement to conjugal love-making or even prevent it completely. Tristram, for example, could confidently rule out 'all December, - January, and February' as months for his conception because Walter Shandy was 'all that time afflicted with Sciatica' (I, iv, 9). It is this impediment, and not as some critics have argued impotence, that characterizes the efforts in *Tristram Shandy* to establish human relations. It points to a natural skittishness in individuals to allowing another access to their real feelings, their bodies and their personalities without the protection of a hobby-horse. Toby, as Trim points out, is not

impotent but afflicted with a hip injury that would discourage amorousness and Mrs. Wadman is not so much driven by lust as by a need for human contact. Although Toby's hobby-horse is delaying the full relations of marriage, the facts are brought to the surface by Trim, to be relayed to Mrs. Wadman by Bridget, and the future holds promise for their love. That Mrs. Wadman had desisted from her inquiries out of compassion for Toby's plight becomes her chief excellence in his mind as he recognizes the consideration. A bridge, like that between Walter and brother Toby, is about to be made between man and wife. The significance of the cock-and-bull story which ends the novel lies in the fact that impotence is being heartily joked at and Toby is not whistling. This is the positive moral in *Tristram Shandy* – human relations are possible and can be the one infallible balm for emotional injury.

In Sterne's characters, Scott found a 'lively picture of kindness and benevolence, blended with courage, gallantly, and simplicity,'²² that compensated fully for his other failings. For reasons perhaps beyond those of Scott, this point in fact catches the key to *Tristram Shandy* in an underlying positive humanity that informs even Sterne's grossest prurience.

To attempt an assessment of Sterne's style is to study the mask he chooses to adopt, Tristram. Tristram's hobby-horse is writing or more particularly writing about himself by writing about the characters and circumstances that have formed him. The best way to understand this hobby-horse, as with the others, is to view it under pressure. A kind of pressure is provided by the pathetic power of the story of Le Fever. The death of Le Fever brings this sentimental vignette to its climax of emotion and the prose used to describe it works by brief utterances, each capturing a glimpse of the scene:

The blood and spirits of Le Fever, which were waxing cold and slow within him, and were retreating to their last citadel, the heart, - railed back, - the film forsook his eyes for a moment, - he looked up wistfully in my uncle Toby's face, - then cast a look upon his boy, - and that ligament, fine as it was, - was never broken.

—

Nature instantly ebb'd again, - the film returned to its place, - the pulse fluttered – stopp'd – went on – throbb'd – stopp'd again – moved – stopp'd – shall I go on? – No. (VI, x, 342-3)

The passage is very successful in its intended purpose of stimulating the reader's sympathy and it was accordingly celebrated by Sterne's reviewers.²³ But what is most interesting is Tristram's stylistic response to the excess of emotion. Seizing upon the possible double application of 'shall I go on?' as an expression of either the body struggling to survive or the observer deciding on whether to continue, Tristram breaks off from the engagement with an intrusion into the story at its very crescendo. Tristram has brought the reader close to a spectacle of death and then backed off at the last moment. The effect is one of relief because it is done at precisely the right instant.

There is a similar strategy used in the tale of Parson Yorick, a character modeled on Sterne himself. Here Sterne imaginatively places himself on his deathbed bidding farewell to Eugenius, who represents Sterne's long-standing friend John Hall-Stevenson:

Yorick's last breath was hanging upon his trembling lips ready to depart as he uttered this; --- yet still it was utter'd with something of a cervantick tone; -- and as he spoke it, Eugenius could perceive a stream of lambent fire lighted up for a moment in his eyes; --- faint picture of those flashes of his spirit, which (as Shakespear said of his ancestor) were wont to set the table in a roar! (I, xii, 27)

With a squeeze of the hand, Yorick dies and Sterne vicariously imagines his own gravestone and its epitaph 'Alas, poor YORICK!' The narrator responds with the famous black page which captures the sense of despair beyond words but which, by its very boldness as a stylistic feature, provides a form of artistic diversion whereby Tristram and Sterne can escape out of the melancholic depths. Sterne has taken Hamlet's lesson to heart. In this way, Tristram can treat the subject of death but then rebound with manic energy, rushing as it were to forget what he has seen. There is much shared in common between Sterne and Tristram but what essentially unites them is this manner of approaching death and then fleeing into art for protection.

In Sterne, a sense of mortality accompanies the writing style at every step, at once providing a shade of depth and seriousness, and charging it with a drive to escape, to revel and to draw attention to itself. Tristram, for example, breaks off a brief consideration of how his work will fare in 'the gutter of Time' (IX, viii, 497) with a meditation on time generally:

I will not argue the matter: Time wastes too fact: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows my pen; the days and hours of it, more precious, my dear Jenny! than the rubies about thy neck, are flying over our heads like light

clouds of a windy day, never to return more – every thing presses on – whilst though art twisting that lock, - see! it grows grey; and every time I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, and every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make. –

- Heaven have mercy upon us both! (IX, viii, 498)

The next chapter characteristically includes only one bold sentence:

Now, for what the world thinks of that ejaculation – I would not give a groat (IX, ix, 499)

One extreme is followed by another. A moment of reflection, of honesty, is covered immediately by a swagger of artistic bravura. First the mind and passion are arrested by a melancholic subject and then rekindled with a flourish or twist of humour. It is the oscillation between extremes that gives Sterne his characteristically complex effect. It is what, in *Tristram Shandy*, he defines as Shandeism and the fact that he uses physiology in that definition is important:

True Shandeism, think what you will against it, opens the heart and lungs, and like all those affections which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely thro' its channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round (IV, xxxii, 270)

Shandeism is a form of medicine or exercise that produces a physical, emotional and mental state of health, something Sterne, who was always afflicted with the 'vile cough' (IV, xxxii, 270) of tuberculosis, could only dream of. Within the system of physiology he is using, melancholia was diagnosed as a state of stagnation or turbidity that effected both the nervous and circulatory systems. This condition was to be corrected or avoided by the stimulation and maintenance of movement in the vital fluids of blood and animal spirits.²⁴ This is the stated purpose of Sterne's prose style as it shifts from moments of sentimental pain to moments of humour, from exercises in exhibitionism to minor acts of indecency that enjoy the friction of giving offence. The nature of Shandeism in fact has less to do with these extremes specifically than with the sensation of change, of moving from one level to another. The effect of Sterne's prose, as he clearly understands, will not suit all dispositions precisely because it is designed to create and maintain a degree of imbalance and flux that will be exhausting to those who do not share Sterne's dire need to feel his passions in motion and his health continuously bolstered.

In *A Sentimental Journey*, Sterne records, refines and embellishes his experiences on the continent where he was traveling in search of better health. The precise way he describes his physiological state when conversing with a lady in Calais displays the healthful effects of sentimental passion:

upon turning her face towards me, the spirit which had animated the reply was fled – the muscles relaxes, and I beheld the same unprotected look of distress which first won me to her interest – melancholy! to see such sprightliness the prey of sorrow. – I pitied her from my soul; and though it may seem ridiculous enough to a torpid heart, - I could have taken her into my arms and cherished her, though it was in the open street, without blushing.

The pulsations of the arteries along my fingers pressing across hers, told her what was passing within me: she looked down – a silence of some moments followed²⁵

It is the sensation of human contact and the resulting ‘pulsations of the arteries’ that are Sterne’s chief concern, with the particular object of these emotions being far less important. The muted eroticism and hint of sentimental suffering, as suffused through the scene, are only enhancements on the emotional state. Actual sexual contact would probably have broken Sterne’s carefully maintained condition as would a spectacle of real suffering. His attempts to imagine the prisoners of the Bastille dissolve into an absurdly appealing miniature. Likewise the famously ambiguous chapter named ‘The Conquest’ is not likely to refer to Yorick’s sexual conquest over a ‘fair fille de chambre’ but rather to a form of complete emotional conquest created when such a rakish action was possible but resisted. Sexuality, to be distinguished from bawdy humour, is limited in Sterne to a form of titillation and emotional agitation.

The most drastic and effective tonic for the emotions is, following the example of Hamlet’s Yorick, laughter and Sterne explains how his work seeks to invigorate the body:

by a more frequent and more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostal and abdominal muscles in laughter, to drive the gall and other bitter juices from the gall bladder, lover and sweet-bread of his majesty’s subjects, with all the inimicitious passions which belong to them, down into their duodenums (IV, xxii, 239)

Again the purpose is the stimulation of internal movement such as is conducive to health. Unlike sentimental passion, an excess of laughter is not a threat and will not drop the reader into even greater depths of melancholia as sentimentalism threatens to do. Humour is

Sterne's key tool and with it he can guide the reader through different levels of emotion and when the emotional depths being plumbed are too deep can snatch the reader away with an intrusion or stylistic trick.

This leaves one with the task of dealing with Sterne's less palatable excursions. In *The Journal to Eliza*, Sterne lays himself bare and in one scene banters with the fact that his physicians have diagnosed a venereal disease in him. He probably did not have a venereal disease but he seems to embrace this hint of rakish immorality as something to celebrate even while he protests his innocence:

thus Eliza is your Yorick, your Bramine – your friend with all his sensibilities, suffering the Chastisement of the grossest sensualist – Is it not a most ridiculous Embarrassment, as even Yorick's spirit could be involved in -²⁶

If he is in fact embarrassed, and he likely is to some extent, then he is enjoying the sensation of reporting it knowingly, undoubtedly, that it would be read. Sterne is enjoying an emotional state at his own expense. This bears some relation to Sterne's indecency which in effect enjoys an emotional state at the expense of others. Given the word 'Crevice', Sterne does not so much use a sexual innuendo as make a spectacle out of using one:

- here are two sense, - quoth he. – And here are two roads, replied I, turning short upon him, - a dirty and a clean one, - which shall we take? – The clean, - by all means (III, xxxi, 173)

The fact is that the 'dirty' meaning of crevice is unavoidable in its context and Sterne is simply taking this opportunity to ensure that if any reader were so innocent as to miss it or so prudish as to ignore it then he will point it out again. This will make sure that offence is given where offence was intended and notoriety achieved where notoriety was sought. It is for this reason that John Cleland, author of the erotic masterpiece *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749), criticized Sterne's bawdy humour as 'too plain'. The two argued on one occasion, to be recorded by Boswell, and Cleland clearly got the upper hand by asking, 'if you had a pupil who wrote c--- on a wall, would you not flog him?' It is an astute point catching the element of adolescent truancy which inclined Sterne to offend others to draw attention to himself. According to Boswell, Sterne 'never forgave' Cleland for his accuracy.²⁷ But once again the actual transgressions of standard morality are not Sterne's

concern; the sensations of liberty, exuberant individuality and controversy are his actual goals.

Sir Walter Scott praised the genuine humanity displayed in Sterne's characterization of the Shandy Family but regretted that his style of narration did not offer the consistent sincerity that would have accorded Sterne the title of a poet as well as a novelist. But if one studies the seeming contradictions in Sterne one soon discovers that all components share a common root in Sterne's recognition of mortality and suffering. His characters develop their defenses each after their own needs and Tristram is no exception. If the tribulations of Toby win Scott's sympathetic applause then it should extend to Tristram and by extrapolation to Sterne. Like Toby, Sterne struggles to disguise an uncomfortable reality and just as Toby's particular affliction drives him into a world of fortifications so Sterne's tuberculosis inclines him to a pursuit, sometimes unrestrained, of buoyancy, healthy circulation and clear breathing. To fulfill this need, Sterne constructs the emotional rollercoasters of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, both of which take a form of health as their goal and by exclusion admit disease as their central theme.

The two contradictory worlds of death and art, sickness and health, melancholia and emotional vivacity, are embodied in the two pages in *Tristram Shandy* that stand out as completely different: the black page and the gloriously colourful marbled page. Sterne challenges the reader to see this hidden meaning:

you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motly emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one (III, xxxvi, 180)

Fleeing ears of his own, Sterne has managed to create artistic masterpieces that take death and all that afflicts humanity into account and yet still arrive at a positive and beautiful conclusion. That his marbled canon has flaws born of excess and weakness only renders it more true and more sincere. In every sense that one uses the word, as a recognition of formal and linguistic fidelity to the complexities of human life, Sterne has earned the title of a poet.

Endnotes

1. John Dunton, *Voyage Round the World; Or, A Pocket Library* (London, 1691) 31.
2. Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Iam Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 10. All subsequent references will be made to this edition and will cite volume, chapter and page.
3. Dunton, *Voyage*, 32.
4. Sir Walter Scott, *The Miscellaneous Works of Sir Walter Scott*, 30 vols. (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1869-1871) III, 176.
5. Scott, *Works*, III, 181.
6. Scott, *Works*, III, 178.
7. Scott, *Works*, III, 296.
8. Scott, *Works*, III, 298.
9. Scott, *Works*, III, 298.
10. William Makepeace Thackeray, *The English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century*, in *The Oxford Thackeray*, ed. George Saintsbury, 17 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1908]) 665-6.
11. Thackeray, *The English Humorists*, 666.
12. Arthur H. Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years* (London: Methuen, 1986) 114.
13. [John Dunton], *The Life, and Adventures of Christopher Wagstaff, Gentleman, Grandfather to Tristram Shandy*, 2 vols. (London: John Hinxman, 1762) I, x-xi.
14. Dunton, *Voyage*, 9.
15. Dunton, *Voyage*, 11.
16. Dunton, *Voyage*, 145.
17. See Stephen Parks, *John Dunton and the English Book Trade* (New York: Garland, 1976).
18. Claude J. Rawson et al., 'Sternean realities', in *The Winged Skull*, eds. A. H. Cash and J. M. Stedmond (London: Methuen, 1971) 92. Rawson writes that 'what the *Tale of a Tub* is really parodying is Sterne in advance.' The peculiar validity of this statement can perhaps be explained by the role of John Dunton.
19. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) III, i, 60.
20. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V, i, 180-90.
21. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V, i, 193-4, 196.
22. Scott, *Works*, III, 296.

23. John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1988) 152-5.
24. Roy Porter, 'Against the Spleen', in *Laurence Sterne: Riddles and Mysteries* ed. Valerie Grosvenor Myer (London: Vision Press, 1984) 84-98.
25. Laurence Sterne, *A Senimental Journey through France and Italy*, ed. Gardner D. Stout, Jr. (Berkely: University of California Press, 1967) 97.
26. Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey with The Journal to Eliza and A Political Romance*, ed. Ian Jack (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 142.
27. Quoted in Peter Sabor, Introduction, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, by John Cleland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) xii.

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