Sterne's Whimsical Theatres of Language

Alexis Tadié

STERNE'S WHIMSICAL THEATRES OF LANGUAGE

*Upon looking back from the end of the last chapter
and surveying the texture of what has been wrote, it is
necessary, that upon this page and the five following, a
good quantity of heterogeneous matter be inserted, to
keep up that just balance betwixt wisdom and folly,
without which a book would not hold together a single
year*

(IX, xii, 761)

this whimsical theatre of ours

(III, xxxix, 279)

Sterne's Whimsical Theatres of Language

Orality, Gesture, Literacy

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Contents

References and Abbreviations

Unless otherwise specified, all references to the works of Laurence Sterne are given in the text, to the following editions:

TS	*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, Vols. I & II, the text, edited by Melvyn and Joanna New, Gainesville, The University Press of Florida, 1978.
(I, xxi, 70)	Volume I, chapter xxi, p. 70.
SJ	*A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick*, edited by Gardner D. Stout, Jr., Berkeley and Los Angeles, The University of California Press, 1967.
(*SJ*, 125)	*SJ*, p. 125.
Letters	*Letters of Laurence Sterne*, edited by Lewis P. Curtis, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1935.
(*L*, 157)	*Letters*, p. 157.
S	*The Sermons*, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, Vol. IV, the text, edited by Melvyn New, Gainesville, The University Press of Florida, 1996.
(*S*, 2)	*The Sermons*, p. 2.

General Editor's Preface

Studies in Early Modern English Literature

The series focuses on literary writing of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its objectives are to examine the individuals, trends, and channels of influence of the period between the Renaissance and the rise of Romanticism. During this period the English novel was invented, poetry began to tackle its unsteady relationship with non-literary discourse and post-Shakespearean drama reinvented itself.

Alongside studies of established figures, the series will include books on important but lesser-know writers and those who are acknowledged as significant but given slight attention: typically, William Cartwright, James Shirley, John Denham, Edmund Waller, Isaac Watts, Matthew Prior, William D'Avenant, Mark Akenside and John Dyer. Also of particular interest are studies of the development of literary criticism in this period, monographs which deal with the conditions and practicalities of writing – including the practices of the publishing trade and financial and social circumstances of writing as a profession – and books which give special attention to the relationship between literature and other arts and discourses.

Monographs on a variety of writers and topics will be accepted; authors are invited to combine the best traditions of detailed research with astute critical analysis. The use of contemporary theoretical approaches will be acceptable, but every book will be founded upon historical, biographical and textual scholarship.

Professor Richard Bradford
University of Ulster

Acknowledgements

Introduction

At the cross-roads

Sterne's writing and living were always placed under the sign of humorous diversity. The rural parson, the good sportsman, as Arthur Cash tells us, the Prebendary of York, became at times the gifted conversationalist of Parisian *salons*, or the rational companion of the *philosophes*. The good sermonist, the charming speaker at gatherings of various sizes, the classical master of oral forms sat down to write novels or letters. The traveller mocked travel-writing. The sentimental writer found Diderot's play *Le Fils naturel* too full of sentiment. In an age still obsessed with orality, he paid close attention to the fine details of printing. In an age when the book was emerging as the dominant cultural commodity, he relished reading aloud or 'shandying it away' in circles of various sizes. He was a literary traditionalist in the modern book-age; he was a modernist in the traditional literary world. He was a *dilettante* who specialised in all things literary; he was a writer who indulged in the company of painters and relished pictures of himself. Sterne defied pigeon-holing, enjoying the many cultural aspects of eighteenth-century life without ever fully appropriating any. Yet, there might have been sense in his nonsense, logic in his madness, as he merged various trends into literary and cultural forms, into variegated texts.

This is echoed by the wealth and diversity of criticism that has been accumulating around his life and works since the eighteenth century. Whereas Sterne's contemporaries debated on the morality (or lack of it) of his works, raved or raged over his sentimental character, attacked his use of pseudonyms or his (many) plagiarisms, the twentieth century has appropriated Sterne on its own terms. Victor Shklovskii was perhaps the first, in a celebrated article (Shklovskii, 1981), to draw the attention of readers to the modernity of *Tristram Shandy*, stressing Sterne's revolutionary position in the history of the novel, and praising the 'chaos' of his compositions. He claimed *Tristram Shandy* as the most typical novel of world literature, because it laid bare the devices and the aesthetic laws of the genre; he placed Sterne among the canonical founding fathers of the novel. At the same time, Sterne's novel does not constitute an *ab ovo* beginning in literature. It is partly inspired by a well-known literary tradition that many have identified—the anatomy, the menippean satire, to take up Northrop Frye's terminology, the learned wit, or again the dialogical novel, in Mikhail Bakhtin's words.[1] In no

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[1] The dialogical aspect of Sterne's works can easily be stressed, especially through the staging of voices and texts, mainly in *Tristram Shandy*. Bakhtin envisages *Tristram Shandy*

particular order, Rabelais, Swift, Cervantes, Browne, Burton, Montaigne, Béroalde de Verville, can all be said to be the great ancestors of Sterne's literary efforts.[2]

The tendency to place Sterne in a prominent position among the first 'modern' writers could be reinforced by the realisation that many novelists, from Diderot to Joyce, from Balzac to Kundera, from Stendhal to Rushdie, acknowledged his influence. At the same time, his importance has waned somewhat in recent critical debates about the origin of the novel, as the quest for historical and theoretical foundations to the genre tends to bypass Sterne, preferring—possibly for reasons of chronology—Defoe, Richardson, or Fielding as the great fathers.[3] The various landmarks in Sterne criticism testify at any rate to the variety and diversity of approaches to his texts, from Ferriar's objections to his borrowings, to Shklovskii's praise of his modernity, from Fluchère's Lockean approach, to Cash's biography, from the 'Winged Skull' conference, to the editorial work of Ian Campbell Ross,[4] and of Melvyn New. *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* are to be found in sundry spots of the critical map, at the cross-roads of theories, tendencies, and influences. Since all critical work relies on a certain amount of contextualisation, whereby the elements relevant to an interpretation are selected or reconstructed by the critic, it seems that Sterne's works have called for an endless variety of contexts, from eighteenth-century literature to contemporary psychoanalysis. When he attacks the myth of the institution of the novel, it is noteworthy that Homer Obed Brown reintroduces Sterne into the discussion, showing that *Tristram Shandy* affords emblematic examples of the variety of possible perceptions of a text, and of the ways in which a text orders the multiplicity of its contexts (Brown, 1997, 116-37).

In the present book, I address the issue of Sterne's position at the cross-roads of several traditions. Historians of the novel and formalists seem paradoxically to agree on Sterne's place in the history of literature—the latter stress his importance in the emergence of 'modernist' discourses, while the former

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only as an embryonic form of dialogical novel, because it does not put forward with enough force the autonomy of the various voices: 'To introduce a parodic and polemical element into the narrative is to make it more multi-voiced, more interruption-prone, no longer gravitating toward itself or its referential object. But literary parody, on the other hand, strengthens the element of literary conventionality in the narrator's discourse, depriving it even more of its independence and finalising power in relation to the hero. (...) In this sense literary conventionality, in Dostoevsky's overall plan, not only did not reduce the signifying — and idea — content of his novels, but on the contrary could only increase it (as was also the case, incidentally, with Jean Paul and even with Sterne)' (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 226-7).

[2] They were of course identified as such in Sterne's time, as reviews acknowledge. See for instance, *The Monthly Review*, vol. 36, 1767, p. 93: 'Several have compared Mr. Sterne, in his humourous capacity, to Cervantes; and others, with more propriety, to Rabelais; but they are all mistaken. The Reviewers have, at length, discovered his *real* prototype,— HARLEQUIN.'

[3] There are of course exceptions to this, such as Everett Zimmerman's *The Boundaries of Fiction* which devotes a chapter to a comparison between Sterne and Godwin (Zimmerman, 1997).

[4] Ian Campbell Ross is also the author of a recent biography of Sterne (Ross, 2001).

prefer to view other novelists as more essential for an understanding of 'the rise of the novel'. I propose to take a different view of Sterne's novels, placing them against a background which is not formalist in the narratological sense, and which does not relate directly to the issue of the rise of the novel. I want to show how Sterne's writings are caught in a predicament which is both historical and formal. Sterne engaged in writing at a moment when perceptions, representations and uses of language were changing. The culture that was defined through social exchanges, conversations, orality, was beginning increasingly to be embodied in the written word, in the book, in literacy. This change was of course gradual but I think that we can detect more than traces of it in Sterne's literary career. He both inclined towards orality, and displayed an acute awareness for the new modes of communication induced by literacy. This tension, between two very distinct traditions that bring into play different conceptual schemes, appears to me to lie at the heart of Sterne's achievement. I agree with the formalist that Sterne's use of language is essential to an understanding of his works, but I prefer to view his representation of language in the context of eighteenth-century perceptions of language; I agree with the historian that a perception of the historical process is fundamental, but I want to insist on the fashioning of language which takes place in Sterne's works, at that historical moment, rather than on the emergence of the 'genre' of the novel.

A brief look at Sternian criticism

While it does not fall within the scope of this book to offer a comprehensive view of Sternian criticism, I think it possible to suggest tendencies within such studies.[5] By and large, essays on Sterne have either tended to emphasise the modernity of his texts, or have, on the contrary, insisted on the necessity of reading the novels within the framework of earlier traditions. The first trend has led critics to insist on freedom of interpretation, while the second trend highlighted contextual and cultural constraints. In both readings, the traditions are distinguished, and suggest complex ways of looking at Sterne's works. In both readings, the particular status of *Tristram Shandy*—and of *A Sentimental Journey*—has been envisaged, through discussions of its place in the history of literature in general, and in the history of the novel in particular.

The analysis of sources has always been an important feature of Sternian studies. In 1798, John Ferriar's *Illustrations of Sterne* attacked Sterne for plagiarism; the twentieth-century critic might occasionally detect borrowings, but would want to emphasise the uses and abuses of traditions.[6] This surfaces in

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[5] For a more comprehensive approach to the diversity of Sternian criticism, the various issues of *The Shandean* and of *The Scriblerian* offer a general, if sometimes biased, survey.

[6] The Florida edition, in tracking down allusions and references, embodies the most elaborate approach of Sterne's texts in this critical tradition. There have of course been a number of debates around the necessity of providing such an important number of notes to Sterne's text; see for example Lamb (1989) who argues that references and allusions,

Fluchère's work (Fluchère, 1961), in Traugott's consideration of Sterne's use of Lockean philosophy (Traugott, 1954), and more generally in the fascinating discussions surrounding the influence of Locke on Sterne. While Sterne was obviously aware of the *Essay upon Human Understanding*, he never intended to offer specific or conceptual analyses of Locke's text[7]—hence the arguments which, from Traugott to Day, have addressed the lack of coherence of Sterne's Lockeanism. While for Traugott, Sterne may have corrected Locke, for Day, 'Locke May Not Be The Key' (Day, 1984). The numerous studies of the influence of Locke on Sterne suggest that Sterne's scepticism was elaborated from a reading of the *Essay*.[8] What seems to me essential is not so much the extent to which Sterne may or may not have borrowed from Locke, but rather the fact that the culture to which he belonged was, by and large Lockean. This means that ideas may have originated from Locke, and reached the Yorkshire parson through a certain amount of interpretation and rephrasing. Although I am interested in the epistemological context which surrounded the works of Sterne, I shall not analyse in great detail the relationships between the two writers; not only have the arguments been developed on a number of occasions, but I think that the circulation of Locke's ideas did not operate solely through direct influence.

While the analysis of philosophical influences on Sterne has on the whole rested on a careful consideration of his alleged Lockeanism, there have been long debates about the generic nature of *Tristram Shandy*, and, to an extent, of *A Sentimental Journey* (Stedmond, 1967; Lanham, 1973). Sterne's great novel has been, interestingly, linked to the satirical tradition (New, 1969), to perceptions of the Enlightenment,[9] to the Cervantic tone (Paulson, 1998), to the tradition of 'learned wit' (Jefferson, 1951; Lynch, 2000), or more generally to the tradition inaugurated by Montaigne (Lamb, 1980; Wehrs, 1988; Parnell, 1994);[10] these analyses move *Tristram Shandy* away from the debates about theories of the novel, and emphasise persuasively the continuity of Sterne's texts with other traditions. I

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contrary to New's view, do not offer an ultimately decipherable message, but must be seen as parts of a figurative arrangement whose efficacy lies in its unannotatable ambiguity.

[7] 'I hate set dissertations' (III, The Author's Preface, 235).

[8] Briggs (1985, p. 517) suggests for instance that the reading of Locke would have provided Sterne with a set of options to explore for his own purposes; he writes: 'Sterne implied a broad range of attitudes toward the Lockean perspectives which he borrowed; ... Sterne deliberately used the interplay of subjective and variable viewpoints to create a fictional world of appositions in which there is a great deal of interpretive latitude.'

[9] Gurr (1999) draws on the work of Habermas in his analysis of *Tristram Shandy*. He develops a conception of history that Sterne may have developed and sees it as an anticipation of twentieth-century views. There are many works on Sterne's use of Enlightenment principles; see for example, on education: Mazella (1999) analyses pedagogy in order to determine 'where Sterne diverges from the paradigms of Enlightenment didacticism in his depiction of the process of socialization' (pp. 155-6).

[10] Parnell's comment is emblematic of such analyses of Sterne's scepticism: 'Blithely unaware of the alleged decline of satire and the conditions that produce it, Sterne discovered in Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, and the Scriblerians not just formal techniques, but a credo fully in keeping with his role as a clergyman' (Parnell, 1994, p. 141).

think that such a perspective yields important results, and forces the critic or the reader to consider the novels against a background of assumptions and references that came to be integrated in Sterne's own approach to literature. While agreeing fundamentally with such analyses, I shall try and extend their scope; it seems to me that Sterne's texts may be understood, not only against the background of previous traditions but also with reference to eighteenth-century debates, in particular about language. It does not necessarily follow that *Tristram Shandy* must be considered more as an anatomy than as a novel, or that *A Sentimental Journey* must necessarily be viewed solely against the tradition of travel literature; Sterne's own conception of the novel included narrative or philosophical devices which existed in other literary or philosophical forms. Sterne's novels encompass a large number of epistemological and literary principles, and their reading is partly determined by such principles. Thus we can make sense of the celebrated 'oddity' of his novels against a background of traditions that reach beyond generic features. At the same time, I think it important to consider not only influences, but ways in which the novels may have been perceived. To read conversations, to be confronted with the volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, to discover the sentimental travels of Yorick, were experiences which may be understood against a background of contemporary assumptions about language, about the history of the book, or about the nature of travel narratives. For instance, we can better understand Tristram's equation between writing and conversation, if we remember what a conversation was in the eighteenth century, and how it was represented. In this book, I try to recover contemporary modes of perception of language and literature, which may explain some aspects of Sterne's enterprise.

The other main trend in Sterne studies has led to the consideration of the modernity, if not the postmodernity, of Sterne. This critical approach insists on the relevance of the works of Sterne to current critical debates, or makes use of current critical debates to throw new lights on Sterne's novels. It probably originates in Shklovskii's essay, and has covered, over the years, critical domains as diverse as philosophy,[11] psychoanalysis (Allen, 1985; Thomas, 1990), feminism (Faurot, 1970; Ehlers, 1981; McMaster, 1989),[12] and deconstruction.[13] These interpretations point to a certain degree of appropriation that occurs in the critical process; the novels are transformed by the critical context in which they are made to appear, thus generating new readings and new perspectives. This appropriation continues in the post-modern era, as Carol Watts stressed in her contribution to the York

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[11] Swearingen (1977) offers an essay on Sterne which is based on hermeneutics, and which aims at showing 'that the novel is an incipient phenomenology the ultimate aim of which is an ontological analysis of the meaning of Tristram's being' (Swearingen, 1977, p. 44).

[12] 'In creating the novel, and paying close attention to such subjects as conjugal relations, childbirth, and what goes wrong with amours, he [Sterne] has shown himself alert (to a degree unprecedented in the history of the novel) to issues of intimate concern to women, as to men' (McMaster, 1989, p. 213).

[13] Although Lamb (1989) may not be classified as 'deconstructionist', in analysing Sterne's scepticism it draws its inspiration from Derrida.

anniversary conference, asking: 'What does it mean to appropriate this particular eighteenth-century text in these terms—as a modernist or post-modernist text *avant la lettre*?' (Watts, 1996).[14] At the same conference, Laurent Milesi pointed out *Tristram Shandy*'s position as the 'primal scene of writing', and as a text which 'reinscribe[s] modernity *before* it has taken its place' (Milesi, 1996, p. 192). In these analyses, *Tristram Shandy* creates, or helps to create, idiosyncratic genealogies. It holds a firm place in the histories of the modern novel, and of modern criticism, where it is identified as the ultimate reference. Yet, in drawing critical attention to the 'open' character of Sterne's fiction, such analyses run the risk of concealing the constraints that determine and define the novels. Melvyn New has attacked the conception of *Tristram Shandy* that emphasises indeterminacy and fragmentation, over coherence and perspective, arguing: 'The pattern of indeterminacy being put to rest by one means or another is, to my mind, as prevalent in *Tristram Shandy* as the opposing tendency, undeniably present, of shattering certainties into fragments of ambivalence and belief. The modern critical agenda, however, focuses all its interest on the second tendency' (New, 1992, p. 130).[15]

The questions raised by this debate are complex, and would imply a detailed reading of the critical texts for a comprehensive treatment. While I find fruitful the (re)construction of a new critical context for the interpretation of novels, I agree with New when he emphasises the determinacy, as much as the indeterminacy, of Sterne's novels. In this sense, I will try to offer a new context for reading the works of Sterne, by confronting them with theories and practice of language use in the eighteenth century; at the same time, I hope to show that this context at times constrains our reading or interpretation, while it suggests at other moments new ways of looking at the texts.

Sterne in history

In a recent essay, the late Nicholas Visser offered to tilt the balance of Sternian criticism towards *Tristram Shandy*'s engagement with history (Visser, 1998).[16] The idle world of Shandy Hall exists thanks to Walter's financial ease—a consequence of his involvement in the Turkey trade, from which he retired with

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[14] Her answer addresses the question of history, showing Sterne's historical perception to exist along (post)modern lines: 'For Tristram Shandy to find himself "in history" is thus to be constituted by textual traces, to conceptualize history as an object that has to be refigured, written. No longer a coherent, causal consequence of events, a "background" against which the novel *Tristram Shandy* might, with some difficulty, be measured, history is rather understood as a *process* by which social meaning is constructed in language' (Watts, 1996, p. 24).

[15] Cf. New (1994) where the author tries precisely to emphasise both the constraints on, and the ambivalence of, Sterne's novel.

[16] His analysis rests on two important articles which provide a careful analysis of time and history in the novel (Baird, 1936; Davidson, 1992).

profit.[17] This income is apparently supplemented by sound investments in the Mississippi scheme.[18] So that the small world of Shandy Hall exists thanks to previous dealings with the world at large; the small world in which the midwife, for instance, has acquired a certain reputation, rests on its inclusion in the affairs of the 'great world' as well as on commercial transactions.[19] Far from being a small, remote Eden, Shandy Hall requires the great world to exist. In turn, this implies that polite conversations, philosophical proceedings, military manœuvres proceed from the commercial and colonial endeavours of the head of the family. Furthermore, Tristram equates the sense of 'regularity' which presides over Walter's (successful) management of his commercial affairs with the ordinary proceedings of Shandy Hall. Laurence Sterne, then, suggests a strong link between the ordering of intercourse and activity 'at home' and 'abroad'.[20]

Sterne's engagement with history appears as well in the references to the wars that Toby fought, and through the general inscription of the narrative in a world altered by the accession of William of Orange. Taking up on Theodore Baird's analysis of *Tristram Shandy* as a historical novel, Visser identifies history as 'a semi-serious theme throughout *Tristram Shandy*' (Visser, 1998, p. 495). The regular references to the contemporary world of creation and of art, together with the awareness of the economic situation displayed by the writer, imply that the author's attentiveness to the 'actual' world is far greater than ususally acknowledged. Visser concludes: 'For all the pseudo-scholarly references and comic learning we find in the novel, there is simultaneously a keen attentiveness to the actual world (...) throughout the novel there is a sustained fascination with the world, stretching from 1688 to the years during which the instalments of the novel were being published and written' (Visser, 1998, p. 499).

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[17] 'My father, you must know, who was originally a *Turky* merchant, but had left off business for some years, in order to retire to, and die upon, his paternal estate in the county of ———, was, I believe, one of the most regular men in every thing he did, whether 'twas matter of business, or matter of amusement, that ever lived' (I, iv, 6).

[18] '...for though 'tis certain my father had long before set his heart upon this necessary part of my brother's education, and like a prudent man had actually determined to carry it into execution, with the first money that returned from the second creation of actions in the *Mississippi*-scheme, in which he was an adventurer' (IV, xxxi, 395). The Mississippi-scheme was a scheme for colonising Louisiana organised by John Law; Law's company went bankrupt in 1720, which seems to imply that Mr Shandy had managed to retire from the scheme early enough...

[19] 'by which word *world*, need I in this place inform your worship, that I would be understood to mean no more of it, than a small circle described upon the circle of the great world, of four *English* miles diameter, or thereabouts, of which the cottage where the good old woman lived, is supposed to be the centre' (I, vii, 10).

[20] This is of course not as strongly marked as in later fiction (or, indeed, in Defoe's novels), but the allusions to the colonial trade show that the text of *Tristram Shandy* bears the signs of Sterne's awareness of the growing interdependence of all activities. Edward Said showed quite persuasively how this process is woven into the very structure of such a novel as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*: 'right up to the last sentence, Austen affirms and repeats the geographical process of expansion involving trade, production, and consumption that predates, underlies, and guarantees the morality' (Said, 1993, p. 111).

The importance of Visser's essay lies in the fact that he brings to light mechanisms of the composition and representation of Sterne's novels. In calling our attention to the inscription of the text of *Tristram Shandy* in the history and culture of the eighteenth century, he forces us to reconsider Sterne's engagement with the phenomenon commonly referred to, since Ian Watt's pioneering essay, as 'the rise of the novel'. Whereas part of Sternian studies have been influenced by Shklovskii's analysis of Sterne's great novel as the first 'modern', if not 'post-modern', novel, *Tristram Shandy*'s engagement with its contemporary history may lead us to assess differently its role in the emergence of the novel. For Visser, if textual play was important in the consideration of Sterne's great novel, it should not mask the importance of the novel's engagement with the world.

According to Watt, *Tristram Shandy* brings to a conclusion the elaboration of the 'formal realism' that, in his view, characterises the rise of the novel. Sterne reconciles Richardson and Fielding, in offering what is a parody of a novel or a *'reductio ad absurdum* of the novel itself'—hence its importance in the context of the 'modern' novel (Watt, 1957, pp. 290-4). McKeon, in his formidable reassessment of Watt's essay, has argued likewise that the engagement with the novel and the definition of form ends with *Tristram Shandy*.[21] Clearly, Sterne's novels appear in the age of print culture, when the categories of the 'novel' and of 'fiction' come to be defined. Sterne, therefore, plays with conventions as well as with the power ascribed to documented fact; the 'parodic' dimension of his texts addresses ironically the pretended naturalness of the novel. Sterne may be seen to resist the 'naive empiricism of the claim to historicity', which purports 'to document the authentic truth' (McKeon, 1987, p. 48). But I would argue that this engagement with the forms of the emerging genre generates an ambiguous position. Sterne makes use of the conventions of oral culture as well as of the artifacts of print culture; he claims the tradition of the story-teller at the same time as he contributes to the definition of the 'author' within the print culture. I will therefore argue that Sterne is not merely bringing a process or a definition to an end, but that he is addressing the changing modes of the narrative within the context of eighteenth-century culture. Rather than viewing his literary achievement as the end of a process of definition, I want to show how Sterne's texts engage with varied and complex issues—without suggesting a closure of the definition of the 'novel'.

Hunter discusses the satirical dimension of Sterne's novels in a rather different light, showing for example how the use of the 'diaristic' concern for detail, which is so central to such novels as Defoe's, is placed at a comic distance in *Tristram Shandy*. In the very failure of the method, Sterne's insistence on details and circumstances points to the fact that the novel depends on 'the impulse to

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[21] 'The implications of the formal breakthrough of the 1740s are pursued with such feverish intensity over the next two decades that after *Tristram Shandy*, it may be said, the young genre settles down to a more deliberate and studied recapitulation of the same ground, this time for the next two centuries' (McKeon, 1987, p. 419).

record, sort out, and conclude' (Hunter, 1990, p. 310).[22] More specifically, Hunter's analyses imply that Sterne's novels belong to the emerging genre, not as a closing moment of definition, but as a central investigation of its modes and workings. Hunter draws attention to nine features that help us understand the formation and reading of novels. The use of the 'marvellous', the engagement with taboos, the inclination toward the confessional and the exhibitionistic, the tendency to probe and promote loneliness and solitariness, the tendency to categorise and differentiate readers, the question of knowledge, the use of interpolated stories, the basic narrativity of the novel, and didacticism, are all features that Hunter identifies as central to the apprehension of the nature of the novel; any reader of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* can see how Sterne's texts address these issues (Hunter, 1990, pp. 29-55). With Hunter, I think that Sterne's novels can be placed at the centre of a debate about the 'rise of the novel', rather than on the margins of it, as one of the many endeavours to come to terms with specific narrative issues, rather than as the concluding moment. Therefore, it is possible to investigate the question of their involvement with the culture of the time not as a closing satirical achievement, but rather as essential to our understanding of the constitution of the novel.[23] More specifically, in order better to understand Sterne's efforts at solving the problems of the novel, it is important to question both the traditions which seem to be disappearing (and particularly their oral manifestations), and the new conditions of the writer of novels in the world of print. I want to suggest that Sterne 'battles' with two paradigms at the same time, displaying an evident nostalgia for orality, as well as a concern for the modes of writing in a print culture. In this sense, we might say of Sterne that he is neither 'ancient' nor 'modern', but that his position is essential to an understanding of both paradigms.

Zimmerman's concern for the emergence of fiction leads him to focus on history, not on the Histories written in the eighteenth century, but rather on the practice of writing history, on the epistemological and narrative processes involved in such an enterprise. He argues that the (shifting) boundary between history and fiction is constitutive of the novel.[24] Central to our understanding of *Tristram Shandy* (but also of *Tom Jones* or *Clarissa*) is the border it shares with history, i.e. its referentiality (Zimmerman, 1996, p. 44). Zimmerman argues that Sterne's engagement with history brings to light the importance of narrative patterning and

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[22] Cf. Hunter (1990, p. 310): 'Only a thoughtful calculation by the reader—a calculation Tristram himself refuses to make in his zeal to give details—reveals that Tristram's extreme circumstantiality is seriously misplaced, leaving the text reeling in uncertainty about basic matters of paternity, heroic lineage, and identity. But even Sterne's ultimate rejection of the assumptions built into a circulstantial method testifies, in the way he asserts the rejection, to the novel's very dependence on the method, whether or not it succeeds philosophically in actually revealing truth.'

[23] Cf. '*Tristram Shandy*... struggles with one theoretical problem after another involving the novel' (Hunter, 1990, p. 42).

[24] Mayer (1997) also addresses the question of the divide between history and the novel, focusing mainly on Defoe. Mayer identifies for Sterne's novels a genealogy which, not untypically, includes Richardson and Fielding, and goes back to Locke.

textual presence. Sterne grounds his narrative on Tristram's necessary ordering of written traditions and documents, on the material basis for the construction of the text.[25] But the tension between the aspiration to exhaustivity (the tradition of the 'anatomy') and the impossibility of ever achieving closure, accounts, in Zimmerman's view, for the fluidity of boundaries, and the 'almost continuous revisions of meaning' (Zimmerman, 1996, p. 196). Hence the sense of transience so important to *Tristram Shandy*, and the tension analysed by Zimmerman between the book as object and the 'disintegrating narrative' (Zimmerman, 1996, p. 200). Hence also the fact that the novel as a genre comes to fill the place of history; it creates the conditions for persuasiveness which history has relinquished. Sterne's concern for the process of writing, using documents, past artifacts, revisions, etc., partakes of the changes in categories and redefinitions of genres that were taking place in the eighteenth century. Zimmerman's outlining of *Tristram Shandy*'s boundary with history (both as process of writing and as consciousness of the history of the 'great world') draws our attention to the central position this novel occupies in our perceptions of eighteenth-century literature; at the same time it is an invitation to look further into the question of precisely how this centrality is defined. Sterne's insistence on the processes of writing (history) connects *Tristram Shandy* firmly with the increasing importance of the genre of the novel. But I think it is only part of the picture, and that the traditions which Sterne engages with and recapitulates—namely the narrative forms connected with oral culture—may help us understand better the ways in which his novels are inscribed in history, and in the history of the novel.

Homer Obed Brown's *Institutions of the English Novel* questions forcefully the notion of genealogies of the novel. For the author, the very notion of 'the rise of the novel', or 'the origins of the English novel' is itself a fiction, invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Brown, 1997). In this sense, what is important is not the recognition of a platonic ideal of the novel which might emerge from Defoe and be fulfilled some time around the publication of *Tristram Shandy*. One of the paradoxes of Sterne's novel, as Brown argues, is that it is both a canonical text, and one that escapes all canonical definitions of the genre of the novel.[26] The novel, in Brown's analysis, tells a story which is not of natural straightforward genealogies, but of appropriation and use, of the construction of its own history. The place of *Tristram Shandy* might therefore be not one where the main trends of the rise of the genre (*pace* Watt) are reconciled, nor does Sterne's novel bring a process to a conclusion (*pace* McKeon); on the contrary, its importance lies in the fact that it keeps all definitions open, that it mediates and redirects, and induces further negotiations. If we abide by a concern for what the novel *is* or *ought to be*, *Tristram Shandy* as Dr Johnson's famous comments indicate, does not conform to the rules of the genre, and must be

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[25] 'Tristram's exultations in his authorial powers suggest on some occasions at least a limited victory for the moderns, whose authority over the past is exemplified in Tristram's masterful assimilations and revisions of earlier texts' (Zimmerman, 1996, p. 186).

[26] 'The canon of the novel is a canon without a single model, a canon without a rule' (Brown, 1997, p. 134).

perceived as parodical, satirical, or struggling with the (necessary) features of the novel. On the other hand, if we insist on 'the irreducible heterogeneity of the discourses and forms that contribute to the institution of the English novel' (Brown, 1997, p. 177), we may apprehend Sterne's novels and achievements rather differently, and take, as I propose to do, their 'heterogeneous matter' (IX, xii, 761) as the starting point.

While Sterne's novels do offer features that may be linked to empirically isolated concerns of the emerging genre, their fundamental heterogeneity may indicate other ways to read them. Sterne was neither founding father, nor brilliant disciple, nor again an extremely odd writer; his engagement with forms or with language elicits varied responses, various attitudes to the texts. His works contribute to the perception of what will be later viewed as the history of the novel, they address both history and the writing of history; in this sense they are indeed central to our perception of what novels have come to represent. But they do not contribute to a 'definition' of the genre; the attention that we pay to 'generic' features should not deter us from apprehending features that do not belong to the foundation of a new genre.[27] In arguing that the heterogeneity of Sterne's texts is central to their constitution, I do not want to deny their inscription in various histories, let alone the history of the 'great world' of the eighteenth century. Rather, I want to shift the focus of attention—I hope to show that Sterne's enterprise is best understood in a context where *writing* matters more than writing *novels*, where the story-teller is rapidly fading behind the author, where the *book* is more important than the *novel*, where the changing attitudes to language and its representation contribute to the shaping of writing.

Language and its representation: orality and literacy

If we accept that the 'rise of the novel' is simply a reconstruction, it is possible to envisage the perception of Sterne's works on a different basis, confronting the experience of reading not only in the relationship which the texts entertain with other fictional writings, but also in the context of perceptions of the language strategies at work. In this sense, the satirical intent would not be seen as solely directed at the conventions of the emerging genre, but rather as one of the strategies of the writer to mock 'Ridicule' in a most general sense: 'The Plan, as you <may> will percieve [*sic*], is a most extensive one,—taking in, not only, the Weak part of the Sciences, in wch the true point of Ridicule lies—but every Thing else, which I find Laugh-at-able in my way—'.[28] Or again, if we consider the

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[27] Hunter speaks rightly of the 'tyranny of formal definition', and introduces the need to pay attention to novelistic features which are not specific to novels, with the following remark: 'The trouble is, attention to distinctive novelistic features tends to obscure characteristics that novels share with romances or other fictional kinds and thus to present a distorted sense of the species' (Hunter, 1990, p. 30).

[28] Letter to Robert Dodsley, May 23, 1759, *Letters*, p. 74. This all-encompassing irony can of course be traced to the generic tradition of the satire.

sentimental theme, it may be related to the tradition of the sentimental novel, and
be compared, albeit unfavourably, to the Richardsonian treatment.[29] At the same
time, any definition of Sterne as a sentimental novelist necessarily requires an
edition, i.e. a reconstruction of the text, such as the one that was published in 1782
under the title *The Beauties of Sterne: Including all his Pathetic Tales and Most
Distinguished Observations on Life. Selected for the Heart of Sensibility.*[30] This
does not mean that Sterne is not a sentimental writer, but that such a reading forces
upon the texts the constraints of a category. In this sense, I do not want to
approach the Sternian texts from a generic perspective (although genre is a
component of the texts). I will start from 'the heterogenous matter' and show how
it can be apprehended from the point of view of language. More precisely, I am
concerned in this book with perceptions and representations of language.

    In the eighteenth century, a culture which had been dominated by oral
transactions came to be replaced by a culture predominantly based on the written
text. An age where conversation and oral language dominated cultural exchange
gave way to one where printed communication took precedence. This obviously
requires qualification. The move is slow, and it certainly originates in the
seventeenth century,[31] ending somewhere in the nineteenth century, but the basic

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[29] Richardson himself famously did not approve of *Tristram Shandy*: 'execrable I cannot but
call them; for I am told that the third and fourth volumes are worse, if possible, than the two
first; which, only, I have had the patience to run through. One extenuating circumstance
attends his works, that they are too gross to be inflaming', *Correspondance of Samuel
Richardson*, ed. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 6 vols, 1804, V, 144-54; quoted in Cash (1986, pp.
90-1). Cash mentions the fact that 'there is no certain evidence of his reading the novels of
Richardson, Fielding, or Smollett, though we can hardly doubt that he did so' (Cash, 1975,
p. 199).

[30] See for example the preface: 'The *chaste* part of the world complained so loudly of the
obscenity which taints the writings of *Sterne*, (and, indeed, with some reason), that those
readers under their immediate inspection were not suffered to penetrate beyond the title-
page of his *Tristram Shandy*;—his *Sentimental Journey*, in some degree, escaped the
general censure; though that is not entirely free of the fault complained of. To accommodate
those who are strangers to the first of these works, I have, (I hope with some degree of
judgment), extracted the most distinguished passages on which the sun of Genius shines
resplendent, that all his competitors, in his manner of writing, are lost in an eclipse of
affectation and unnatural rhapsody.'

[31] See Kernan (1987, p. 9): '...not until the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the
eighteenth century did [print] transform the more advanced countries of Europe from oral
into print societies, reordering the entire social world, and restructuring rather than merely
modifying letters.' That such changes took place only gradually and throughout the century
appears further in Kernan's analyses: 'The responses of eighteenth-century men of letters to
print were as various as their social circumstances. Pope made a fortune from the
booksellers, prophesied the destruction of polite letters, and passed on, somewhat stained
perhaps by print by still the last great writer of the old order. Writers who were protected by
money and position from the full power of print to shape the life of writing, for example
Horace Walpole with his art press at Strawberry Hill, the fastidious Thomas Gray at
Cambridge, or the elegant Edward Gibbon writing in Lausanne about the decline and fall of
an earlier aristocratic society, continued to maintain in their lives and writings the traditions