Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction

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The letter of advice that Walter Shandy writes to his brother Toby contains a warning not to let Widow Wadman, whom Toby is courting, read “Rabelais, or Scarron, or Don Quixote”: “They are all books which excite laughter; and thou knowest, dear Toby, that there is no passion so serious, as lust” (VIII.xxxiv: 537). Yet the literary presences that are monitory for Walter are tutelary for Tristram—or rather for Laurence Sterne behind him. *Tristram Shandy*, with its witty *mésalliance* of eschatology and scatology, its *reductio ad absurdum* of contemporary topical issues, its “deconstructive resistance to the philosophical dogma” of its age (Harrison 1991: 76), the oppositional subsversiveness of its treatment of authority, and its comic peripeteia, is a carnivalesque work, though less festive than *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and even *Don Quixote*. Sterne’s is a *diminished* carnival: its social base is narrow, and its “appetites,” mainly sexual (references to food are sparse in this novel, especially in comparison with *Tom Jones*), are more likely to be defused, short-circuited, or thwarted than fulfilled. The pattern starts with the novel’s opening episode, a version of *coitus interruptus*.

The carnivalesque interface of the body and the environment is massively explored in the novel—not as a joyful overflow but rather as painful

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1. There are, of course, exceptions: for example, when, in a discussion of legendary Wunder-
incursions—by way of asthma that Tristram is said to have got skating (oppositionally?) against the wind, the wounds Toby and Trim get in the war and Tristram from the obstetrician’s forceps and a window sash, a nocturnal musket shot that kills Le Fever’s wife in his arms in the tent, the illness of which Le Fever himself dies in an inn, the intrigues that break the endurance of Parson Yorick, and so forth. On the sunnier side, the environment affects the self by way of somatic expressions of contagious emotion.

Nor is the laughter that rings in Sterne’s novel entirely festive. It is, par excellence, the kind that can help turn “nauseous thoughts about the horror and absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live” and which may be seen as constituting “the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity” (Nietzsche 1966: 60). If we believe the narrator (who in this instance is mimicking Corporal Trim), the “book is wrote, an’ please your worships, against the spleen” (IV.xxii: 270). Like most oppositional writing, it clears a well-lighted livable space in “this scurvy and disasterous world of ours” (I.v: 10): physical circumstances and cultural patterns are diseases, yet not without remissions. Here I shall discuss two kinds of such remission in Sterne’s novel: the comic (anti-aphrodisiac?) treatment of lust and the peculiar type of leaping wit with which it overlaps.

Tristram’s father’s hobby-horsical theory of laughter as an impediment to desire contrasts with Tristram’s own description of sexuality as intrinsically comic. Indeed, upon enumerating the features of Love in alphabetical order,

A gitating
B ewitching
C onfounded
D evilish affairs of life—the most
E xtravagant

... kinder Yorick refers to “the great Lipsius” who “composed a work the day he was born,” Uncle Toby’s remark is “They should have wiped it up” (VI.ii: 371).

2. The image of the tortured victim of the Inquisition (in whom Trim sees his brother Tom) in Yorick’s sermon and Trim and Toby’s memories of unmercifully flogged soldiers likewise belong to this strand of motifs, associated less with the enclave of the Shandy’s Yorkshire neighborhood than with Sterne’s contemporary Voltaire’s “best of all possible worlds.”

3. The sublime, which Nietzsche names in the same breath (as “the artistic taming of the horrible”), is in Sterne’s world reduced to the sentimental.
Tristram adds that “the R should have gone first” (501). What it may please Walter to call “lust” and Tristram to call Love is, *mutatis mutandis*, first and foremost, Ridiculous.

Yet in his own witty way Sterne subscribes to the tradition of viewing love as a step to higher things. He has his Tristram object to the macrometaphor of “falling in love” (which, incidentally, signals a peculiarly English *catachresis*). The phrase, says Tristram,

is not at all to my liking: for to say a man is *fallen* in love,—or that he is *deeply* in love,—or up to the ears in love,—and sometimes even *over head and ears in it*,—carries an idiomatic kind of implication, that love is a thing *below* a man:—this is recurring again to Plato’s opinion, which, with all his divinityship,—I hold to be damnable and heretical;—and so much for that. (VI.xxxvii: 422)

The passage is part of Sterne’s game of carnivalizing language by reviving and literalizing dead metaphors such as “would not hurt a fly” or “at the drop of the hat.” Yet Tristram’s reflection on the metaphor of “falling” in love also rejects the Platonic notion of spiritual self-transcendence through love of the higher order: regular earthly love, says Tristram, is *not* a lower-order phenomenon. It is only via our general *fallen* state (since Adam) that “falling” in love can connect with all the other “falls” in the novel—those of Dr. Slop, the midwife, the stone that wounds Toby, the sash window that circumcises Tristram, the sermon that slips out of a book, and the hot chestnut that gets inside the pompous Phutatorius’ breeches (cf. Burkhardt 1961: 70–75 on gravity). Though the carnivalesque explicitness of the link between sexual attraction and the lower regions of the body is, for Tristram, an inexhaustible source of jest, throughout the novel the literally somatic and the figurative motion associated with sexual desire take the direction opposite to “falling”: things *rise*—like the Phoenix from its ashes. A veritable paradigm of micromotifs of upward motion—open or hidden, actual or

4. In most other languages the notion tends to be expressed by a single verb, usually reflexive, for example, *sloviubit’sia* (Russian), *sich verlieben* (German), *įsiмяlyti* (Lithuanian), *lehitahve* (Hebrew).

5. In the novel’s most famous pleonastic paragraph Toby apostrophizes a fly and releases it through the window (II.xii: 100); later his servant Trim regulates the other servants’ feeling on the sudden demise of Bobby Shandy by dropping his hat on the floor by way of visual aid (V.vii: 325).
virtual, literal or metaphoric—is presented in the story of Trim’s recuperation from the near-lethal wound in his knee with the help of a beautiful nun’s ministrations:

The fair Beguine . . . continued rubbing with her whole hand under my knee—till I feared her zeal would weary her—“I would do a thousand times more,” said she, “for the love of Christ”—In saying which she pass’d her hand across the flannel, to the part above my knee, which I had equally complained of, and rubb’d it also.

I perceived, then, I was beginning to be in love—

As she continued rub-rub-rubbing—I felt it spread from under her hand, an’ please your honour, to every part of my frame—

The more she rubb’d, and the longer strokes she took—the more the fire kindled in my veins—till at length, by two or three strokes longer than the rest—my passion rose to the highest pitch—I seiz’d her hand—

—And then, thou clapped’st it to thy lips, Trim, said my uncle Toby—and madest a speech. (VIII.xxii: 521–22)

In *Tristram Shandy*, the erection (“Call it by it’s [sic] right name, my dear,” as Walter Shandy might say to his wife in the context of keyholes, VIII.xxxv: 539) is an emblem of *resilience*—suffice it (or almost) to recollect that in the eighteenth century the verb “to die” still retained memories of its earlier sense of “spending.” This function of the theme of male sexuality is practically “laid bare”6 in Volume VII of *Tristram Shandy*, in which the protagonist is literally running away from death to the south of the European continent, pursued by death, this “son of a whore” that, like a bailiff sent to collect the debt of nature, “has found out [his] lodgings” (VII.i: 432). Weak and ill, in a hurry to reach warmer climes, Tristram cares little for the standardized tourist traps of the towns on his way but always notes, and courts the notice of, attractive women—they are the landmarks on his way to recuperation. He enjoys the very fleetingness of these encounters, as the women walk away or as the coach carries him on. When, during a country dance, Nannette, the “nut brown maid” with a slit in her petticoat, makes advances to him, he dances off, and then dances away further south (VII.xliii: 485). One need not read this as a sign of Tristram’s impotence

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6. This term for autometadescrptive touches in a work of fiction, a calque of the Russian *obnazhenie priema*, was practically launched by Victor Shklovsky’s 1921 article on Tristram Shandy (see Shklovsky 1968). Sterne’s own account of the principle is as follows: “never do I hit upon any invention or device which tendeth to the furtherance of good writing, but I instantly make it public; willing that all mankind should write as well as myself” (IX.xii: 560).
or his trailing a morality in tow: his agenda on this journey is only instrumentally erotic—it is the resurgence of desire rather than its consummation that gives him the sense of being alive. And it is this resurgence, and this “picaresque resilience” (Bloom and Bloom 1984: 59), this rebounding, that Walter Shandy, elsewhere in the novel and with something else in mind, refers to as the “secret spring” that lifts one up from prostration (IV.viii: 251).

True, impotence may well be read into the passage where Tristram is reflecting “upon what has not pass’d”—and Jenny reassures him that she is, nevertheless, “satisfied.” What exactly has not passed, however, is suppressed; and Jenny’s utterance is hidden by a line of undecipherable asterisks (VII.xxix: 466): these particulars do not matter, Sterne may be saying to the reader along with Jenny. What does matter is the symbolic garters that Tristram is holding in this episode: “Honit soit qui mal y pense.”

Anticipating Henry Bergson’s belief that the source of the comic effect lies in the combination of the living and the mechanical, the somatic “jack-in-the-box” (1956: 105–10) resurgence of desire is also, for Sterne, an ample source of comedy. This resurgence is, of course, but one of the many cases of literal and figurative springing up of hobby-horses out of the black box of human consciousness, the thing-in-itself which (to save us, as it were, the window tax) is not equipped with “Momus’s glass” (I.xxiii: 65)—“by their playthings ye shall know them” (Reed 1981: 152–53). The homographic “spring” refers to the revival of nature after winter, to the “jumping” of bodies and wits, to “a source” (of vitality, of inspiration, and of water—which Eugenius is recommended to drink), as well as a mechanical implement that signifies elasticity and impels both the grandfather clock and the jack-in-the-box “Ruling Passion.” A comic hobby-horse/jack-in-the-box duet is performed in the episode in which, following Trim’s suggestion that Toby

7. My interpretation of the “secret spring” as resilience, whatever mixture of psychic forces or intellectual interests it may be based on, has the merit of establishing the common denominator between the application of this clockwork metaphor both to Tristram and to his father. It thus differs from Martin Battestin’s view that for Walter, “the ‘secret spring’ that smooths the rough passages of life is his irrepressible Hobby-horse,” whereas for Tristram it is “another sort of mechanism by which the happiness of others is made our own and colours our perception of the world, dissolving the boundaries that separate us and harmonizing the self with Nature” (1974: 257).

8. In his discussion of Sterne’s bawdy puns as the fuel for the heightening of imagination and a method of activizing the reader, Robert Alter (1984: 101–2) interprets occasional impotence (an instance of the minor vexations with which fortune pellets the protagonist) as expressive of the common human condition.

9. Bergson’s comments on the tension between sympathy and humor and on the corrective effect of comedy are remarkably similar to some of the views of humor in the eighteenth century (for a useful survey of the latter, see Iser 1988: 106–20).
should go to his brother’s Yorkshire estate, where models of fortifications can be built on the bowling green, Toby wishes to waste no time and prepare for departure, whilst Trim first wishes to harangue about it. The comedy involves a double entendre: variations on Toby’s “say no more” are attempts to press Jack, or rather Trim, back into the box, at the same time also expressing Toby’s turgescent concurrence in Trim’s enthusiasm. “My uncle Toby,” says Tristram,

was fired with Corporal Trim’s project and description.—Trim! said my uncle Toby, thou hast said enough.—We might begin the campaign, continued Trim, on the very day that his Majesty and the Allies take the field, and demolish ’em town by town as fast as—Trim, quoth my uncle Toby, say no more.—Your Honour, continued Trim, might sit in your arm-chair (pointing to it) this fine weather, giving me your orders, and I would—Say no more, Trim, quoth my uncle Toby.—Besides, your Honour would get not only pleasure and good pastime,—but good air, and good exercise, and good health,—and your Honour’s wound would be well in a month. Thou hast said enough, Trim,—quoth my uncle Toby (putting his hand into his breeches-pocket)—I like thy project mightily;—and if your Honour pleases, I’ll, this moment, go and buy a pioneer’s spade to take down with us, and I’ll bespeak a shovel and a pick-ax, and a couple of—Say no more, Trim, quoth my uncle Toby, leaping upon one leg, quite overcome with rapture,—and thrusting a guinea into Trim’s hand.—Trim, said my uncle Toby, say no more;—but go down, this moment, my lad, and bring up my supper this instant. (II.v: 86–87)

The springing of the hobby-horses that the characters ride through the novel is, figuratively speaking, largely mechanical and deterministic. In a novel by Virginia Woolf it would be replaced by the more abstract and earnest notion of “compensation”—something that helps a person get through, and by, the multiple vexations of life. In Tristram Shandy, however, the hobby-horse-in-the-box palliates misery by causing an upsurge of adrenaline, but in other novels it also often leads to further misery and mischief. If Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway has learned to submerge conceptual abstractions in the flow of reality, the problem of Walter Shandy is the para-Lockean tendency of “isolating meaning from situation. . . . In his refusal to recognize difference [between meaning and situation] he becomes comic, especially since he is constantly confronted with it through his proliferating and contradictory theories. The comedy . . . consists in the continual bombardment of theory by the realities that theory excludes, for nearly every theory brings
about a misfortune which then needs to be neutralized by another theory” (Iser 1988: 39).

The common denominator of Walter’s theories and Tristram’s fascination with desire (about which Walter tends to “pish, and huff, and bounce, and kick,” VIII.xxvi: 525) is not a hobby-horse itself but its propelling mechanism, the “secret spring.” As Mark Loveridge (1992) has demonstrated on the example of the “cock-and-bull” ending of the novel, far from being merely a competitive in-joke for Sterne, Hall-Stevenson, and their circle, or merely an attack against tartuffery, Tristram’s covered-way license is over-determined. Each case has a local function in its context and serves a specific local felicity. Cumulatively, however, sexual references represent, and humbly carnivalize, human powers of resilience. Though Tristram complains that, instead of giving him great griefs, fortune has been “pelting” him, “like an ungracious duchess” with “so many small evils” (VII.xxix: 466), it is not to be forgotten that the prospect of early death of consumption, of being “cut short in the midst of my days” (VII.xiv: 446), is a rather grievous circumstance (both Tristram’s and Sterne’s own). Though we are all “driven, like turkeys to a market” V.vii: 327), it is with an unobstructed prospect of early death that he spins his yarn. Death is a major presence in the novel, and not only in the episode where it knocks at Tristram’s door and is requested to “come again” (VII.i: 431). The long story of Tristram’s birth, complete with references to the disasters that can overtake the mother and the child, ties the motifs of birth and death into faster knots than those of Obadiah’s over Dr. Slop’s green baize bag.

Indeed, Mrs. Shandy’s refusal to have Dr. Slop attend to her and her preference for the old midwife (whose license does not include the use of instruments such as a crochet and forceps) can be read as representing Mrs. Shandy’s hobby-horsical pose of “Injured Virtue” in response to her

10. Sterne’s relationship with Hall-Stevenson, partly reflected in Tristram’s friendship with Eugenius, uncannily anticipates that of the Joyce–Gogarty and Stephen Dedalus–Buck Mulligan pairs, with their strange mixture of care, affection, rivalry, and suspicions of betrayal.

11. Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom discuss Tristram’s “picaresque resilience” with an emphasis of the minor rather than the major disasters of his life (1984: 59–61). I read Tristram’s foregrounding of the former as a diversionary maneuver; another such maneuver is his mock-heroic cataloguing of his complaints in such a way that “grief” should get diluted among the homogeneous parts of the list: “What a jovial and a merry world would this be, may it please your worship, but for the inextricable labyrinth of debts, cares, woes, want, grief, discontent, melancholy, large jointures, impositions and lies” (VI.xiii: 390).

12. For the information in the following paragraph I am indebted to Arthur H. Cash’s (1968) and Bonnie Blackwell’s (2001) explanations of eighteenth-century topical issues concerning obstetrics and their bearing on the narrative of Tristram’s birth.

13. See Harrison 1994: 94; this interpretation of Mrs. Shandy’s choice pits Mr. and Mrs. Shandy’s
husband’s refusal (sanctioned by a clause in the marriage settlement) to take her to London where she could be attended by first-rate doctors. But it also gives rise to an exercise of bawdy wit following Toby’s unwittingly obscene reference to her modesty: “My sister . . . does not care to let a man come so near her * * * *” (II.vi. 89)—a comic reference to the contemporary theory that a woman experiences an erotic heightening during childbirth and can direct it towards a male attendant. More seriously speaking—and positing a grain of truth underneath most jokes, including the bawdy ones—it may also be Slop’s religion, or perhaps popular conceptions of Catholic values among Protestants, that makes Mrs. Shandy shun him: in the contemporary Catholic environment, the choice between the life of the mother and that of the infant during a catastrophic birth was believed to be routinely decided in favor of the infant, since the mother is already baptized while the infant still needs to be thus saved. Despite her blandly consistent jack-in-the-box resistance to her husband’s learned discourses, Mrs. Shandy seems to be aware of such eventualities: she grows ash pale at her husband’s reference to Caesarian section (which was, at the time, still fatal to the mother).

And yet, as in the case of Walter’s auxiliary theories that try to bridge the gaps between his previous concepts and new contingencies, the comic discourse on baptism in utero actually comes to salvage Slop’s professional standing. It is, after all, by parents rather than babies that Slop is retained—and the mother, surprisingly enough, may have a say in the matter. Dr. Slop can be trusted to choose in favor of the mother since his green baize bag (the one that undergoes a displaced Caesarian section when Dr. Slop impatiently cuts the knots with which Obadiah had secured it—see Blackwell 2001: 111) is said to contain implements of “salvation and deliverance”—that is, not only forceps (deliverance) but also a “squirt” (II.xi: 97), a “petite Canulle”—for baptism in utero (salvation). The question whether one needs to be born, separated from the womb, in order to be baptized is Tristram’s seriocomic scatology-cum-eschatology touchstone for distinguishing between Roman Catholic (“popish”) and Anglican attitudes.

(and Dr. Slop’s) “deliberative individualism” (72–82) against Toby Shandy’s commitment to the good of others.

14. Characteristically, Walter Shandy immediately “dismounts” from this hobby-horse on seeing his wife’s response: genuine feeling is consistently shown to break through fossilized attitudes in the world of the novel. It is likewise characteristic, however, that, in contrast to Swift, who, through Gulliver’s account of Laputa, mocked contemporary science for its irrelevance to moral life, Sterne, through Walter Shandy’s sundry scholarly and parascientific theories, mocks the opposite phenomenon—the all-too-ready application of hobby-horse hypotheses to flesh-and-blood individual lives.
Dr. Slop’s squirt is also associated with the novel’s thematic strand of trust: the question whether a woman in labor can trust a Catholic obstetrician is complicated by the question whether the Almighty cannot be trusted with a stillborn infant’s salvation even without baptism. It is distrust that causes the complications of the Shandy marriage settlement—a monumental caricature on legal and personal prudence in dealings with the Other. A popular version of theological distrust leads to the hasty baptism of the protagonist (frustrating his father’s plans for his name) when, on the night after being born, he has a fit and seems to be on the verge of death.

The seriousness of the theme of trust in *Tristram Shandy* is emphasized by Yorick’s skeptical sermon on “trusting” rather than “knowing” that one has a good conscience, yet, like every serious issue, it does not escape carnivalization—along with the concept of defining to which it is juxtaposed:

—Here are two senses, cried Eugenius, as we walk’d along, pointing with the fore finger of his right hand to the word Crevice, in the fifty-second page of the second volume15 of this book of books,—here are two senses,—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, replied Eugenius. Eugenius, said I, stepping before him, and laying my hand upon his breast,—to define—is to distrust.—Thus I triumph’d over Eugenius; but I triumph’d over him as I always do, like a fool.—”Tis my comfort however, I am not an obstinate one. (III.xxxi: 196–97)

Tristram’s triumph is foolish because, among other things, it absolutizes the virtue of “trusting.” The downfall of the other holy fool of the novel—Sterne’s alter ego, Parson Yorick—is caused precisely by his undue trust in being taken at his own valuation. The sermon that argues that one can only trust but never know that one has a good conscience deliberately subverts itself by showing that even (or perhaps particularly) self-trust is, as often as not, misplaced. The main drive of Tristram’s “triumpant” sally is, however, against Locke’s agenda of defining the terms of discourse before doing philosophy.16 As the metaphor of the roads suggests, defining means cutting off one of the options, reducing one’s freedom (or license), limiting one’s possibilities—all through distrusting the road that looks dirty at a distance. Taking the dirty-looking road, like trusting the innocuousness

15. The reference is to “a small crevice, form’d by a bad joint in the chimney-piece” at which Toby looks when pondering the meaning of Walter’s phrase about knowing “the right end of a woman from the wrong” (II.vii: 90–91).

of the bawdy implications of “crevices,” might be a minor leap of faith, if only faith in noncontagion. It might also mean trusting the language to lead one to thoughts and felicities that no preconceived intention and no a priori intuition could generate unaided and which conventional decorousness would obstruct.

Tristram’s triumph is also “foolish” in the cap-and-bells sense (see II.ii. 77): a court jester’s wit may smuggle in wisdom by a back window as it carnivalizes the portly gravity of “proper” discourse (in French, one might note, propre conflates the meanings of “decent” and “clean”).

As Lakoff and Johnson have shown, a metaphor hides something as it highlights something else (1980: 10–13). While the metaphor of the two roads emphasizes the motifs of choice, option, and the walking of the straight and narrow, it downplays the fact that in semantic practice one may walk both the roads at the same time. Tristram Shandy actually gives us a whole paradigm of semantic relationships in which two or more meanings can be activated simultaneously. This paradigm includes

- Polysemy: one may or may not choose to ignore one of the meanings of “ejaculation” (IX.ix: 556) or “shift” (VI.iii: 372); one may associate the word “bridge” with one’s hobby-horse (as in the case of the broken drawbridge on Toby’s bowling green) or, more pertinently, with the broken bridge of Tristram’s nose (III.Xxvi: 192–93); one may wonder who hears what “in the beds of justice” when Mrs. Shandy says that she “cannot conceive” (VI.xix: 395);
- Double entendre: are we to think of the sex act taking place “in the beds of justice”? In other words, is it only figuratively, as part of the argument, that Walter Shandy “presses the point home to” his wife (VI. xix: 396)?
- Common associations clustering around words with a single dictionary meaning—or around images signified by these words: when, in a case of straight-faced prétention (Fontanier 1977: 143–45), the narrator stipulates that when he uses the word “nose” he means “a Nose and nothing more, or less” (III.xxxi: 197), he can trust his readers to come up with other ideas—in Slawkenbergius’s tale Strasbourg falls because its inhabitants distrust the genuineness of Diego’s nose;

17. See New 1994: 101. Cf. Jacques Berthoud (1984: 25): “Blameless locutions like ‘rise up trumps’ or ‘get it out of him’ or ‘to make ends meet’ turn into ideas we can scarcely permit ourselves to entertain.” Berthoud distinguishes between paronomasia and double entendre in terms of the fully admitted ambiguity of the former and, in the latter, the suspension of the “sexual sense” between the text and the reader who can choose to disown one of the meanings or opt for a collusion with the text (29).
• Uncommon associations that can debauch intrinsically innocent monosemic words, such as “whiskers”; the resulting mistrust is dramatized in Lady Baussiere’s rigid obtuseness to the sundry applications for charity (V.i: 312–13) as she rides off from a linguistic coup d’état that turns “whiskers” into a phallic symbol at the court of Navarre;

• Homonymy: in the episode of the nuns of Andoüilles, the meaning, or rather the intention, of the phonetic combinations bouger and fouter is to get the mules to move; out of the fear of an iconic relationship between the mule-prodding sounds and the sexual acts that they can signify, each of the nuns pronounces only half of each word, thus actually reinforcing this relationship (hence, though the mules do not hear them, “the Devil does,” VII.xxv: 459). One may add that “noses” is a homophone of “gnosis” (Iser 1988: 89), and “nosology” is a science of diseases and their classification.

In each particular instance (the examples given above are a representative cross-section), the narrator chooses to trust the reader as to which semantic path to take—or whether to take two or more at the same time.

It is not that Tristram can expect the reader to follow the play of his verbal wit at all times: his agônistic “triumph” is undiminished if his jokes remain underread—it is only special wits that “jump” (III.ix: 150) every which way. Tristram’s wit, like that of his father, is largely enthymematic: it skips or subverts one of the terms in would-be syllogisms. This technique is demonstrated in Walter’s “triumph” over Obadiah. The household expects thunder and lightning to shower on the head of the unfortunate groom through whose negligence Walter Shandy’s favorite thoroughbred mare has given birth not to an appropriately eugenic colt but to a mule (the hybrid of a horse and a donkey). Aristotle says that if “Nurse not immortal wrath” is a maxim, “Oh mortal man, nurse not immortal wrath” is an enthymeme (1954, 1394b: 21–23). It is however, through another enthymeme that Walter manages to follow the Attic maxim:

My mother and my uncle Toby expected my father would be the death of Obadiah—and that there never would be an end of the disaster.—See here!

18. The enthymeme is an argument in which, in contrast to a syllogism, one of the premises is either implicit, absent, or nonvalid, and the conclusion is, therefore, a matter of probability rather than certainty. See Toker 2006 for a more detailed discussion of rhetorical and narrative enthymeme in Sterne and Joyce.
You rascal, cried my father, pointing to the mule, what you have done!—It was not me, said Obadiah.—How do I know that? replied my father.

Triumph swam in my father’s eyes, at the repartee—the Attic salt brought water into them—and so Obadiah heard no more about it. (V.iii: 318)

The enthymeme works as follows:

The mule is the offspring of the mare and a donkey.
[Missing but implied term: Obadiah is an ass.]
How do I know Obadiah is not the father?

Walter is so pleased with the jumping of his wit that the butt of the joke is let off easy. And yet his triumph is also “foolish.” In the story of Bobby’s death, Obadiah and the other retainers get their revenge. Their minds take predictable little leaps as well—Susannah’s first undisciplined thought, leaping over intermediary stages, is about Mrs. Shandy’s almost new green nightgown (which she will get when her mistress goes into mourning). Obadiah’s mind leaps to the other practical implication of Bobby’s death: (Aunt Dinah’s legacy will not be needed for Bobby’s Grand Tour; therefore, the funds can be used for the improvement of the estate; hence) “we shall have a terrible piece of work of it in stubbing the ox-moor,” says Obadiah (V.vii: 325). Several chapters later, however, Obadiah is spared even that punishment, since Walter’s love of the mot juste boomerangs: upon Trim’s reciting the Ten Commandments,

I will enter into obligation this moment, said my father, to lay out all my aunt Dinah’s legacy, in charitable uses (of which, by the bye, my father had no high opinion) if the corporal has any one determinate idea annexed to any one word he has repeated.—Prythee, Trim, quoth my father, turning round to him,—What do’st thou mean, by “honouring thy father and mother?”

Allowing them, an’ please your honour, three halfpence a day out of my pay, when they grew old.—And didst thou do that, Trim? said Yorick.—He did indeed, replied my uncle Toby. (V.xxxiii: 354)

A man of his word, Walter can now be fully expected to lay out the thousand pounds in philanthropic donations, expanding, as it were, Trim’s caritas in honoring his father and his mother instead of improving his real estate (possibly to the detriment of the peasants).
Whatever doubts arise in the reader’s mind concerning Tristram’s legitimacy or DNA (see New 1994: 99–100), he clearly proves to be his father’s son in his ability to use leaps of wit to compensate himself for practical losses. If a pecuniary loss is sustained, one can at least “say some smart thing upon the occasion, worth the money” (VII.xxxv: 475).\footnote{Cf. Alter on wit in Sterne: “if nothing very hopeful can be done in or about the human condition, we at least afford ourselves through our human posturings an endless spectacle for delighted contemplation” (1984: 103).} Wit is Tristram’s only resource when he needs to regain his self-esteem after the French tax collector (“commissary”) first causes a rip in his breeches and then demands that he pay for the stage horses that he would have used had he not changed his mind about the mode of traveling:

—By all which it appears, quoth I . . . that if a man sets out in a post-chaise from Paris—he must go on traveling in one, all the days of his life—or pay for it.—Excuse me, said the commissary, the spirit of the ordinance is this—That if you set out with an intention of running post from Paris to Avignion, &c. you shall not change that intention or mode of traveling, without first satisfying the fermiers for two posts further than the place you repent at—and ‘tis founded, continued he, upon this, that the REVENUES are not to fall short through your fickleness—

—O by heavens! cried I—if fickleness is taxable in France—we have nothing to do but to make the best peace with you we can—

AND SO THE PEACE WAS MADE (VII.xxxv: 475–76)

In this joke on the 1763 Peace of Paris that ended the Seven Years’ War Tristram surpasses his father in the elegance and complexity of the enthymeme:

In France tax is levied on fickleness.
[The French are famously fickle].
[Hence the French treasury must have collected a great deal of money.]
[Hence France must be a very rich and strong state.]
We had better make the best peace with them we can.

A large part of Tristram’s enthymematic wit, however, involves different semantic varieties of bawdiness, which he comes to regret on one occasion, when he cannot help joking at the expense of the deranged Maria near Moulins (IX.xxiii–xxiv: 574), an episode reminiscent of Walter’s remorse on his jocular imputation of something beyond curiosity to his wife’s wish to watch
Toby’s courtship through a keyhole (VIII.xxxv: 539). After the episode with Maria, Tristram vows future adherence to Wisdom rather than to Wit: “I swore I would set up for Wisdom and utter grave sentences the rest of my days—and never—never attempt again to commit mirth with man, woman, or child, the longest day I had to live” (IX.xxvii: 574). Indeed, in most of the remaining portion of the novel, it is the other characters, and mainly in direct speech, who provide the comedy—of Toby’s frustrated courtship or the “cock-and-bull” ending: Tristram himself “commits mirth” only as the narrator, not as a character. It is difficult to imagine that Tristram’s sentimental compunction will keep him uttering only “grave sentences,” but the turning-point episode is prefaced by a suggestion that jack-in-the-box wit and desire are not the only secrets of Tristram’s emotional resilience: on the way to Moulins, he says, “every thing I saw, or had to do with, touch’d upon some secret spring either of sentiment or of rapture” (IX.xxiii–xxiv: 573; emphasis added).

Both Toby’s loss of interest in Mrs. Wadman and the moratorium on Tristram’s wit signify the approaching end: both the emblems of resilient vitality begin to dissolve in the milk of human kindness, quite like Aunt Dinah’s legacy. The bull in the “cock-and-bull” finale alludes to Christopher Smart’s verse fable about the old bull condemned to slaughter after being baited with dogs to make his flesh tender, as was the custom (see Loveridge 1992: 39–43). The “son-of-a-whore” grim reaper who had found out Tristram’s (and Sterne’s own) lodging is preparing to re-visit.

The license of Tristram Shandy is, indeed, limited and somewhat melancholy beneath its cheerful notes—it is the best one can do with that “diminished thing,” the life still at one’s disposal.

Yet Tristram will not be caught dead moaning about the approach of the unwelcome caller. The resilient sexuality rhythmically evoked in the novel, and the equally resilient comedy, bawdy or otherwise, stand for a kind of humble stoicism in accepting one’s curtailed lot. Despite the contrary pulls of human nature, most characters of the novel sooner or later live up to decent humane sentiments. With most of them, these sentiments are not hypocritical but form a continuum with their real feelings: in any case, as Uncle Toby maintains, “God only knows who is a hypocrite, and who is not” (VI.vii: 380): in recognition of the better potential of the human heart, we are invited to trust the sentiments of the others (and their carnivalesque
somatic expressions—the body does not lie\textsuperscript{20}) until given hard evidence that the trust is misplaced. And not even then, perhaps, seeing how the hard fact of the hot chestnut and Yorick’s stooping to get it are misread by Phutatorius, sealing Yorick’s fate.

The diminished nature of Sterne’s carnival is also evident in that the butt of his attacks is the tartuffery of Phutatorius and similar rulers of the church and the state, the grave and massive pillars of society. The shabby though landed country gentleman puts on a cap and bells to defuse the pomp of his “betters.” By contrast, the novel never calls into question the essentially feudal class structure on which the residue of this gentleman’s standing is based. Despite all the carnivalesque free and familiar contact between the masters and the servants, there is a clear distinction between the parlor and the kitchen. Some of the servants, such as Trim, may be smarter than their masters; yet they are all grateful to be serving the Shandys, whom they consider the best masters in the world, and, for all their occasional leaks and lapses, are uniformly faithful to them. In fact, it may be precisely the confidence in the stability and, as it were, legitimacy of the class stratification that allows for that free and familiar but nongenital contact, with the coins (usually crowns—in a defusion, as it were, of the theme of uncrowning) passing from the masters to the servants for special efforts or feats—seigniorial gifts\textsuperscript{21} rather than middle-class “perks.” And when Trim is suffered to make his long speeches or tell his stories to the distinguished company, he dutifully interpolates verbal bows such as “an’ please your honour(s)” or “With humble submission to his honour’s better judgment” (V.xxxviii: 360).

Nevertheless, even the diminished carnival destabilizes the upper-class privilege of the Shandys, if not through the events of the fictional world then through the narrative patterns. A great deal of the novel’s irony lies in that Toby Shandy, the gentlest of souls alive and totally committed to the good of others (see Harrison 1994: 96–98), is equally strongly committed to the

\textsuperscript{20} The anchorage of morality in the body would seem to undermine the reason-orientated principles of eighteenth-century ethics, but in fact it radicalizes their mainspring, which was to ‘naturalise’ morality by grounding it in man himself. What is more natural than the body, which alone can express the naturalness of morality? The manifestation of morality by bodily signs indicates a correspondence between the two—relieving morality of any need for substantiation as to its naturalness. Consequently, instead of abstract references like commandment, reason, rationality and definition, Sterne takes morality to be action’ (Iser 1988: 46–47).

\textsuperscript{21} As Carolyn Steedman notes, domestic “service was a component of the eighteenth century’s modern labor relations, in which contract individualism only slowly replaced older forms’ (2002: 134). In the Shandy household that process may have been even slower than usual.
art of warfare, which, not ignoring the death and suffering that wars bring about, he regards as “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). On another occasion, Uncle Toby adds that the art of war is needed in order to “intrench the lives and fortunes of the few, from the plunderings of the many” (IX.viii: 555), that is, to protect upper-class privilege. Both the ideas are reduced *ad absurdum* when Toby’s and Trim’s delight in reenacting contemporary sieges on the bowling green is accounted for by “the consciousness” that “in carrying them on,” says Toby, “we were answering the great ends of our creation” (VI.xxxii: 416) and when the expense incurred is waived as insignificant “so long as we know ’tis for the good of the nation” (III.xxii: 185).

The latter two astounding statements, however, invoke an irrational but all-too-human belief in sympathetic magic, which, incidentally, it might have behooved Walter to recollect during Tristram’s birth: in terms of symbolic gestures, it is not right of Walter to make Slop read Ernulphus’s systematic curse while Mrs. Shandy is in labor upstairs—it is, in fact, particularly wrong in view of the numerous suggestions that for Walter, in contrast to Toby, the ultimate end of our creation is to “be fruitful and multiply” and thus consolidate a country squire’s standing. For a variety of reasons, both the brothers serve their respective principles somewhat indifferently. Walter’s new hobby-horse theory in the novel’s last chapter holds that the trouble with social conventions is that the implements of the destruction of life are cultivated, gilded, carved, inlaid, enriched, and paraded, whereas the sundry implements of the production (or generation) of human life are

22. Cf. John Traugott’s view of Toby’s attitude to the war beyond the maneuvers on his bowling green (1968: 4) with the response of Melvyn New (1994: 68). Jonathan Lamb places Toby’s idealization of war into the context of Swift’s pamphlets “The Conduct of the Allies” and “The Character of Richard Steel” and notes that to “the ambitious and the turbulent, who Toby’s war was aimed at restraining,” war actually “offered unparalleled opportunities for pelf and political manipulation” (33). Lamb goes on to suggest that “Sterne’s hatred of deceit and hypocrisy did not lead (as it did with many civic humanists) to the enshrinement of the ideal of absolute personal integrity that somehow survives corruption to sustain what is left of the *patria*” (34).

23. In the eighteenth-century context this statement is not as absurd as it may sound now. When military theory calls for matter to be made mental—it may mean not merely devising a vocabulary for redescribing physical violence beyond recognition (cf. Scarry 1985: 60–108) but also, and perhaps mainly, the art of using artillery and fortification not to increase but to reduce casualties: “Chivalry stood for an attempt to endow instinct with a kind of correct deportment. Warfare in the classical age of Western Europe was conducted with great formality because there was a wish to reserve and renew this correct deportment, notwithstanding the advent of inhuman factors. Following the desolation left by the Thirty Years’ War, there was a desire to keep expenditure within bounds—men cost dear!—and to avoid alarming the population so thoroughly as to render recruitment impossible” (de Rougemont 1956: 254–55). The agenda of modern total warfare tends to dismiss such principles as obsolete.
jealously hidden from view (IX.xxxiii: 587). His oral dissertation on this subject is duly interrupted by the sudden appearance of Obadiah with complaints about the Shandy bull (if not about the “Irish bull” of the novel). If Toby’s belief in the divine right of privilege is reduced ad absurdum earlier in the novel, Walter’s witty double entendre about the hairiness of Obadiah’s baby—meant to save the old bull from ignominy and slaughter (cf. the fate of the old horse in Orwell’s Animal Farm)—ultimately points to the intellectual sophistication that, for all its hobby-horse tangents and capers, may be the last bastion of the social class that claims trusteeship of the cultural heritage of their country.

The example of Tristram Shandy shows, among other things, that the reading of a carnivalesque narrative need not be a carnivalesque experience. The characters of the novel, including the narrator-protagonist, may attract sympathy but are too systematically distanced by their own eccentricities and the proto-Borgesian learned narrative complications to sustain sympathetic identification. The irritations of the first reading—spell disrupted by shock, manner competing with matter, a profusion of explicit and submerged allusion that constantly humbles the never sufficiently informed reader, the sense of being in the room where people are laughing and we may be missing the joke, and repeated calls for backtracking and catching up—create a predominantly agônistic experience (cf. also Iser 1988: 94–120), even for Sterne’s immediate target audience, a narrow enclave of the well educated with a free choice of reading matter. The modern reader’s wrestling with the text for control of meaning is made still harder by the need to reconstruct the cultural codes of the period and its literary and philosophical contexts in order to understand the narrative’s semantics—its references to humors, homunculi, squirts, sieges, enclosures, commissaries, window taxes, its staging of the association of ideas, and its dialectics of book learning and “authenticity” (Lamb 1989: 40–51ff). On a repeated reading, with initial difficulties overcome, there still remain numerous puzzling passages and

24. This interruption is one of the reasons why I disagree with Melvyn New’s ascription of Walter’s belief “that a society more ashamed of its sexuality than of its violence, a society always ready to make war but ashamed of making love, is in moral and social peril” to Sterne himself (1994: 81).

25. Obadiah has expected his own baby to be born at the same time as his calf, and this does not happen. The fact that the baby is hairy is interpreted to mean that it is premature—or, continuing the joke of Obadiah and the mule, that it has been sired by the bull: in both cases, the bull is cleared, on the basis of reasonable doubt, of the accusation of sterility.
hence a large residue of interpretive struggle, yet the element of *alea* is enhanced—not by the shock of flouted convention as on the first reading but through moments of discovery: meanings fall into place (e.g., the polysemy of “the secret spring,” or the recurrence of the micromotif of “falling”), mental dice hitting expectant narrative grooves. In a sense, the experience of the first reading parallels the characters’ doomed attempts to stave off the chance and accident that constantly disrupt their best-laid plans; the second reading is, by contrast, one of gratitude for the unexpected moments at which we realize that what flows in the seemingly random stream of narrative detail and opinion is actually knotted into a vertiginous complexity by a multiplicity of consistent semantic, thematic, philosophical, and intertextual strands.

Such moments of triumph, in which, paradoxically, the enjoyment of *alea* and *ilinx* amount to a concession of the reader’s defeat in an agonistic wrestling with the text, create the aesthetically heightened meaning effects, which complement the presence effects produced by the novel’s imagery and style. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche talks about the cheerfulness of the Greeks as one that can only be based on the knowledge of horror. The cheerfulness of *Tristram Shandy* is of this kind as well. It is offered us against the background of intrigues and enclosures at home, the Inquisition, icy winds, and absurd entrapments abroad, the grim logic of war, fever, consumption, and inequality everywhere. The remissions that such aesthetically distancing cheerfulness offers are almost religiously oppositional: their grateful pleasure flows unevenly from a “secret spring” through loopholes in the ill-starred (“disasterous”) overlap of the flawed human condition and inept social contract.