

REASON AND HEART IN *TRISTRAM SHANDY*:  
SOME IDEAS ON THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

One of the most delicate epistemological problems of the eighteenth century is the search for a balance between two seemingly opposed domains: the absolute monarchy of Reason versus the anarchy of unbridled feelings and passions (Eagleton 70-101). If positivism allegedly succeeded in doing away with the latter in its recognition of empirical data as the only objective matter of knowledge, it is no less true that literature was acclaimed as the most genuine expression of the vagaries of subjectivism. Kant complicated things further by attempting a difficult fusion between both principles. The result was that pure reason proved to be an inadequate tool for knowing what was emotionally defiled, since the only means to offer a knowledge of the objective world was one tainted with sheer subjectivism. The aim of this paper is to show some of these conflicting ideas and the no less paradoxical conclusions on the governing of human knowledge by reason and heart through the analysis of *Tristram Shandy*, a novel in which the moot question of epistemology takes up a prominent position and determines to a great extent some axes of its thematic structure.

Pointing out some of the paradoxes which a novel like *Tristram Shandy* encloses is far from being an easy task. Despite the flurry of critical interpretations which its episodes have generated, many fundamental themes still remain hidden behind what seems to be a plotless story told by a narrator who sets out to tell his own life and opinions and who, oddly enough, always appears to be an unknown quantity.<sup>1</sup> Critics have always remarked that the most controversial critical area is made up of the problems brought about by a narrative discourse which, instead of offering a coherent portrait of characters, only manages to make the reader get entangled in a network of literary registers which very seldom help to fulfil the demands of a traditional autobiography, and which only contribute to alter the “logical” order of events we might expect in a novel of this kind. The consequences of this intentional disorder are all too obvious: the reader very often loses his way in a literary universe which lacks not only a well-defined theme but also a unique literary register. In fact, *Tristram Shandy* brings together a number of literary genres and linguistic codes which are not only utterly different but also very difficult to map within the boundaries of a discourse without disintegrating its own identity.<sup>2</sup> We might thus say that the novel is an autobiography, at least a mock one, but it

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<sup>1</sup> The question of the narrator's identity seems to be a moot point in Sterne's novel. Consider quotations like the following: *My good friend, quoth I -as sure as I am I- and you are you. -And who are you? said he. -Don't puzzle me, said I. (VII. xxxiii. 500).* For a deeper analysis of this question, see J. E. Swearingen (1977).

<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising that E. M. Forster is unable to classify *Tristram Shandy* as a novel: *If you lay rules for the novel, and then apply them to Tristram you have to admit it wasn't a novel. You have been enjoying it -but it wasn't a novel.* See E. M. Forster (1962, 182).

could likewise be defined as a book of travels or a book of memoirs. Through its pages we find tales, legalistic papers, a treatise on military tactics, scientific hypotheses and theories, a powerful scholarly apparatus of rhetoric, and a long list of digressions which are beyond classification. What is, then, the real link which keeps together this endless list of different registers? The answer might be sought for in the characters whose lives the narrator tries to depict, i.e. Toby and Walter, the two Shandy brothers. The problem is, then, to determine the role Toby and Walter play in the structure of the novel, and to decide whether they are simply characters of which the narrator offers a complex image or if, rather, they are characters endowed with a symbolic status. Walter Allen (1954) does not hesitate to claim that they have a symbolic function which nonetheless does not turn them into archetypes:

Sterne's characters, like those of only the greater writers, have the enduring quality of figures in myth: more is suggested by them than they actually state; they express ways of behaviour, inclinations of temperament, that are permanent from generation to generation. (76)

The question, however, is still unanswered: what can these two utterly different characters epitomize? It is obvious even on a cursory reading that their behaviour, way of life and view of the world are ruled by principles completely opposed: never do we find that they behave or think alike under similar circumstances. Yet, different as their attitudes may be, they both fail to control their world to the point of becoming puppets moved, or rather tossed, here and there by the uncontrollable stream of hostile events which shape their lives. But what are these principles -opposed yet complementary in the human being as viewed by Sterne- which Walter and Toby symbolize at their best? Our contention is that these principles are simply those involved in the traditional bourgeois dichotomy "Reason versus Heart", i.e., those implicit in the ideological opposition between the language of reason and the language of passion or feeling. An epistemological opposition which is operative in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which is in fact rewritten throughout the novel in many different ways: Science vs. Religion; Eloquence vs. Lillabullero; Judgement vs. Wit; and Logic vs. Love. The barren world of "cold" Reason, in which everything must have a logical, cause-and-effect explanation, thus being easily converted into categories and concepts of a major system of knowledge versus the world of ungoverned passions, to which man becomes a prey, are clearly represented by Walter and Toby respectively. Thus, Sterne's discourse becomes the exposition of the working of these two opposing epistemological categories, showing the shortcomings of Heart in its efforts to resolve everyday problems but also making the rational answer to those problems look utterly ridiculous. Walter and Toby emerge, then, as projections of the two forces which rule human knowledge of the world. If our interpretation is correct, Sterne does not hesitate to show us how insufficient these two principles are when they work in isolation. It is in this sense that we may then scoff at Toby's "hobby-horse", i.e. at his obsession with the science of fortifications. But Mr. Shandy's use of reason in his rationale about the influence of noses and names upon man's character proves to be no less derisory. Similarly, if Toby's attitude when he falls in love with Mrs Wadman becomes an easy

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ridicule of a man vexed by his passions, Mr. Shandy's advice to avoid the snares of love becomes the clearest example of the absurdities which rational capacity may bring about when wrongly used or when applied to an object out of its range:

Thou must begin, with first losing a few ounces of blood below the ears, according to the practice of the ancient Scythians, who cured the most intemperate fits of the appetite by that means. (VIII, xxxiv, 565)<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to ascertain that Sterne's novel shows not only an incipient lack of confidence in Reason -the new universal value put forward by the bourgeoisie as the most praiseworthy attribute of man- but also begins to undermine the safest foundations upon which Reason was apparently built. In order to see how the critique of reason is carried out, let us take the example of the narrator's acknowledged intention in this novel and the premises upon which this seems to be based:

- 1.- Tristram Shandy intends to tell the story of his life.
- 2.- An individual's life, like all natural phenomena, must have an origin (coition and / or birth in this case) which must be carefully analyzed to find out the true causes which account for the character of the individual as an adult. The empiricist method designed to explain the protagonist's life is one which shows many resemblances with that of biology.
- 3.- For this reason, one of the most recurrent ideas in the novel is the question of Tristram Shandy's birth, since it is here that the answer to many questions can be found.

It is evident that the method proposed to explain an individual's life suffers from full-blown rationalism. Furthermore, the approach shows the limitations of the exclusive use of reason, since man's life cannot be viewed as a merely biological phenomenon to which is applied the empiricist research method of natural science, however rational and conclusive this may appear to be. In this regard it is remarkable that we do not ever get to know anything about Tristram's childhood and youth. There is a sort of leap into the dark from his birth to his adult state, which prevents the reader from knowing much about his idiosyncrasy. Thus, despite all the endless efforts of the narrator to build up his life-story in a most objective way, the long disquisitions about his birth do not throw much light on his character. And his identity as a unique subject, his personal traits as a distinct individual, look so dark and vague as to remain to be unknown. In other words, Reason fails altogether -or at least presents too many restrictions- when it has to cope with the problem of giving a thorough / global view of a human being. However, it is Mr. Shandy who best exemplifies this wrong use of Reason and the critique of the rational capacity we have been referring to.

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations from the novel have been taken from Laurence Sterne. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. Ed. Graham Petrie. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.

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## MR. SHANDY AND THE MISADVENTURES OF THE MONARCH REASON

As pointed out above, Mr. Shandy incarnates one of the thematic forces which plays a most decisive part in the novel: the language of reason, as understood by the eighteenth century ideology. We should make clear that there are at least two contradictory yet related views of reason in the age:

1.- The first is the widely held idea that "reason" is the capacity of the subject to solve problems and difficulties and raise questions, in opposition to ignorance, superstition and the series of deprecatory labels which the bourgeoisie applied to the feudal ideology. In stark contrast to the obscurity of the Middle Ages, reason is here a synonym of light and truth. This is at least the definition imposed by the bourgeoisie, one which naturally entails an optimistic view of the individual who is now assumed to be able to conquer the world by himself and whose strength knows no limits other than those imposed by a boundless rational power.

2.- The second is the view offered by writers like Rousseau, for whom reason becomes a byword for the man's ability which has been artificially developed in the civilized world of Knowledge and Science, in opposition to the lost world of Nature. Undoubtedly, it is this conception of reason as an instrument which offers a merely empirical -and therefore limited- view of reality that a character like Walter incarnates throughout *Tristram Shandy*. That Sterne feels completely dissident in the use of reason for its own sake is clearly indicated in the fact that Walter fails in most of his hypotheses and predictions, up to the extent of becoming a much more pitiful creature than his brother Toby. He becomes the epitome of the modern intellectual who overlooks the emotional side of the human being in his absurd infatuation with the tree of Knowledge. It is for nothing that the *Tristapaedia*, the huge scholarly work of a parent preoccupied with the education of his son, is in the end doomed to failure, for it does not succeed in keeping up with Tristram's rate of growth:

This is the best account I am determined to give of the slow progress my father made in his *Tristapaedia*; at which (as I said) he was three years, and something more, indefatigably at work, and at last, had scarce completed, by his own reckoning, one half of his undertaking: the misfortune was, that I was all the time totally neglected and abandoned to my mother; and what was almost as bad, by the very delay, the first part of the work upon which my father had spent the most of his pains was rendered entirely useless, -everyday a page or two became of no consequence.- (V, xvi, 368-369)

Much the same can be said about his unfortunate wishes to make use of the advantages of science on the birth of his child, since Dr. Slop's obstetrical knowledge and technical instruments prove to be not only useless but even harmful for Tristram, as illustrated by the problems brought about by the forceps:

In bringing him into the world with his vile instruments, he has crushed his nose, Susannah says, as flat as a pancake to his face, and he is making a false bridge with a piece of cotton. (III: xxvii, 222).

Unsurprisingly, the birth of his child comes to contradict all the elaborate predictions and hypotheses he had carefully and rationally constructed about the event: the choice of his son's name, the size of his nose and the process of his education, all of them clearly gainsay the applicability of his rational surmises. In a way, Reason has ceased to be the infallible steadfast support to which a man can resort to predict, measure and manipulate the events of the world. Furthermore, Reason, if cut off from the natural passions of man, can even be at odds with truth: *My father, whose way was to force every event in nature into an hypothesis, by which means never man crucified TRUTH at the rate he did.* (IX, xxxii, 613). In fact, rational explanations are even more absurd when they try to systematize and analyze passions like love or tragical events like death: it is as if Mr. Shandy, all too confident in his endless rational capacity, were unaware of its blatant limitations. The result is too often a piece of pseudo-rational argumentation which very often verges on nonsensical fallacy. Mr. Shandy's reasoning of the harmful influence of love upon man's behaviour well illuminates this point:

That provision should be made for continuing the race of so great, so exalted and god-like a Being as man -I am far from denying -but philosophy speaks freely of everything; and therefore I still think and do maintain it to be a pity, that it should be done by means of a passion which bends down the faculties and turns all the wisdom, contemplations, and operations of the soul backwards - a passion, my dear, continued my father, addressing himself to my mother, which couples and equals wise man with fools, and make us come out of our caverns and hiding-places more like satyrs and four-footed beasts than men. (IX, xxxiii, 613-614)

What we find here is not, as we could expect, a good example of the excellent fruits of reason but rather a jumbling concoction of words and ideas put together at random so as to convey an entirely arguable opinion: love is a contemptible appetite which is hardly beneficial for the human race. Not very different in this regard is Mr. Shandy's reaction before the news of his son's death. Since he never seems to be a victim of his passions, we do not ever see him cry even when he hears that Bobby is dead. Again, he seeks refuge in words, which become the rational -and therefore unnatural- substitute for passions. Eloquence, the rhetorical use of language, thus emerges as the most secure means to wipe out any trace of emotional response, an artefact that curbs any attempt to give way to the natural flow of passions:

His strength -for he was by nature eloquent- and his weakness - for he was hourly a dupe to it; and provided an occasion in life would but permit him to shew his talents, or say either a wise thing, a witty, or a shrewd one - (bating the case of a systematic misfortune)- he had all he wanted. (V, iii, 347-348)

He thus begins to recall all the devastating presence of death throughout the history of human civilizations: from the decay of Troy and Mycenae to the decline of the Roman Empire. Yet we never get the impression of feeling or human pathos in his long discourse about death, and the topic becomes a mere pretext for giving vent to his excellent mastery of historical facts and superb use of rhetorical figures and tropes. In passing it is interesting to recall Rousseau's theory of language, if we aim to understand Mr. Shandy's inversion of feelings into a stream of empty words. Rousseau's notion of linguistic evolution (*Essai sur l'origine des langues*, 1764) entails the transformation of language from a innocent primitive state of purity -in which the expressions of feelings by means of ejaculations, shrieks, cries and laughs were more than sufficient for human communication-into a state in which artificially developed rational concepts -alien to the nature of human heart- were linguistically introduced. As a result, words -language pieces in which signifier and signifiée stood in no transparent one-to-one relationship- and not emotional signs were inevitably created to fulfil the demands of a system of language articulated by Reason (Kevin Barry 66-69). All of this explains why Walter's eloquence becomes a synonym for falsehood, i.e. an artificial device designed to conceal feelings and passions in the sense exposed by Rousseau. In opposition to his endless harangues, Toby's lillabulleros emerge as the most natural form of language since they are not dictated by reason, but spring directly from the heart:

My father managed his affliction otherwise; and indeed differently from most men either ancient or modern; for he neither wept it away, as the Hebrews and the Romans - or slept it off, as the Laplanders- or hanged it, as the English, or drowned it, as the Germans -nor did he curse it, or damn it or excommunicate it, or rhyme it or lillabullero it.- (V, iii, 347)

#### TOBY AND THE VEXATIONS OF A MAN DOMINATED BY HIS UNGOVERNED PASSIONS

Toby seems to embody all the tendencies and attitudes contrary to those epitomized by Mr. Shandy. He is the sentimentalist vexed in a world which does not seem ready to accept him. His inability to think about a topic other than his hobby-horse and his frequent lillabuleros when a situation baffles him place him in stark contrast to Walter's endless and eloquent speeches on any topic of interest for his reasoning capacity:

My father who had an itch in common with all philosophers, of reasoning upon everything which happened, and accounted for it too, proposed infinite pleasure to himself in this, of the succession of ideas, and had not the least apprehension of having it snatched out of his hands by my uncle Toby, who (honest man!) generally took everything as it happened; -and who, of all men in the world, troubled his brain the least with abstruse thinking; the ideas of time and space, - or how we came by those ideas,- or what stuff they were made,- (...) with a thousand other enquiries and disputes

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about INFINITY, PRESCIENCE, LIBERTY, NECESSITY, and so forth, upon whose desperate and unconquerable theories so many fine heads have been turned and cracked,-never did my uncle Toby's the least injury at all. (III, xviii, 199)

Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that the two brothers do not share the same position in any branch of human thought, and that communication between them turns out to be impossible, not only because they do not ever agree to use the same linguistic referent<sup>1</sup> but also because *the gift of ratiocination and making syllogisms* (242) is absent in Toby's mind and wild passions never hold grip of Walter's heart. Thus, they cannot have a conversation about the same topic and they are unable to have an identical opinion about any matter concerning science or religion. In fact, they are subjectively alone, doomed to live shut up in worlds of their own. That Toby is a religious person can be clearly seen in his inability to give an explanation for the size of noses other than *God pleases to have it so* (245). Mr. Shandy's reaction towards accounts of this nature is one we might expect of a person who is *master of one of the finest chains of reasoning* (161). It does not take him long to reject Toby's words for being unfit for his scientific demands:

'Tis a pious account, cried my father, but not philosophical, -there is more religion in it than sound science. 'Twas no inconsistent part of my uncle Toby's character,- that he feared God, and revered religion. (III, xli, 245)

Similarly, when Mr. Shandy tries to give a rational explanation for man's endurance before the endless series of sorrows and afflictions with which his life copes, Toby cannot find any reason for this mystery other than the assistance of the Almighty. In this regard, Walter's words speak for themselves: *That is cutting the knot, said my father, instead of untying it* (IV, vii, 279). Thus, throughout the novel, there is an implicit opposition between the system of scientific knowledge put forward by Mr. Shandy, and designed to do away with error and to find a cause-effect account for everything, and Toby's submission to God in order to put an end to moot questions. Yet it is difficult to decide whether Sterne takes sides in the dialectical opposition of Science versus Religion. We might go as far as to say that the latter has ceased to be the infallible support to which man can resort, since it does not provide him with plausible answers to many of his doubts. Yet Reason is no longer the paradigm for solving man's problems. It is not difficult to remember how far from reality Mr. Shandy's hypotheses are, and how illogical his inability to solve such simple problems as the creaking hinges of a door or the removal of the coat of arms from the family coach prove to be:

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of their inability to share the same linguistic referent are countless throughout the novel. Remember passages like this: *'Tis a pity, said my father, that truth can only be on one side, brother Toby, -considering what ingenuity these learned men have all shewn in their solutions of noses. - Can noses be dissolved? replied my uncle Toby.* (III. xli. 243). Or the following: *Now (...) continued my father, in every sound man's head, there is a regular succession of ideas of one sort or other, which follow each other in train just like -A train of artillery? said my uncle Toby.* (III. xviii. 200-201).

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Inconsistent soul that man is! -languishing under wounds, which he has the power to heal! -his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge! -his reason, that precious gift of God to him (...) serving to sharpen his sensibilities, to multiply his pains and render him more melancholy and uneasy under them! (...) are not the necessary causes of misery in this life enow, but he must add voluntary ones to his stock of sorrow (...)? By all that his good and virtuous! if there are three drops of oil to be got, and a hammer to be found within ten miles of Shandy Hall, -the parlour door hinge shall be mended this reign. (II, xxi, 211-212)

It seems as if his reasoning capacity placed him further from the everyday reality and from the now and here of experience than religion.

Finally there is a question that we should try to pose: Is this opposition between Heart and Reason that we have pointed out only present in the portrait of Toby and Walter? Are they not themselves projections of the forces which shape Tristram's conscience? An answer to this predicament can be easily found on the list of things Tristram decides to see when he is staying at Lyons on his journey through France. These are Lippius' clock-work, the Chinese books and the tomb of the two lovers. The first two things clearly help to surfeit his rational appetite and the thirst of knowledge which he has obviously inherited from his father, whereas his eagerness to visit the last remnants of the lovers is, obviously, Toby's legacy over his character. What is striking, however, is the fact that he does not manage to see any of this on his visit: Lippius' clock is out of order, his desire to see the history of China in Chinese characters vanishes altogether and there is no such thing as the famous tomb of the two lovers in Lyons. Thus, we might affirm that Tristram Shandy is an individual whose reasoning capacity proves to be insufficient to quell his demands, and whose wishes to give vent to his passions are doomed to failure from the very beginning:

Now I almost know as little of the Chinese language, as I do of the mechanism of Lippius's clock-work; so, why these should have jostled themselves into the two first articles of my list -I leave to the curious as a problem of Nature. (VII, xxx, 495)

When I came there was no tomb to drop it upon. What would I have given for my uncle Toby to have whistled, Lillabullero! (VII, xl, 507).

For this reason, there cannot be any doubt that in a novel of introspection and construction of the self's identity (Swearingner, 1977) the analysis of Toby and Walter does serve an aim other than being a simple picture of secondary characters. The opposition of attitudes which they reveal is also the opposition in which the two sides of the narrator's conscience struggles. And hence their importance. Through their carefully detailed representation Tristram is doing no other than depict the inner conflict between his rational bias and his passionate impulses, and therefore throughout the novel there lies a sort of balance between his admiration for the rational and speculative faculty of man and his uncontrollable infatuation with senti-



mentalism. It is no coincidence, then, that he completes the *Tristrapaedia* his father left unfinished and that at the same time he shows an unmeasured interest in matters of such great emotional value as Toby's wooing of Mrs. Wadman -a projection of his unsuccessful experiences as a lover- or Yorick's death. To conclude, his conflict -like that of the modern post-Kantian man- is not one which is easily solved. He has to build up his identity out of the fragmented, incomplete states which Toby and Walter incarnate, and to unite, if possible, the language of Reason and the language of Passions they represent. And this entails a difficult, almost impossible quest for an intermediate position in which Reason and Heart are not necessarily exclusive terms and in which the individual can partake of the one without rejecting the other. As Tristram points out: *REASON is, half of it, SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions.* (VII, xiii, 472).

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