

ANNALI DI CA' FOSCARI

**RIVISTA DELLA FACOLTÀ
DI LINGUE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
DELL'UNIVERSITÀ DI VENEZIA**

XXVII, 1-2, 1988



ESTRATTO

Editoriale Programma - Padova

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THE SHANDEAN TRIAD: SEX/LIFE/DEATH

Et jamais le moment suppliciant ne manquera: comment, s'il nous manquait, le surmonter? Mais l'être ouvert – à la mort, au supplice, à la joie – sans réserve, l'être ouvert et mourant, douloureux et heureux, paraît déjà dans sa lumière voilée: cette lumière est divine. Et le cri que, dans la bouche tordue, cet être, en vain? veut faire entendre est un immense alleluia, perdu dans le silence sans fin.

Georges Bataille, *L'Érotisme*

1.0. *The Longing for life and the Obsession of Death*

Sterne's use of Time is a rather unconventional one – he virtually turns upside down the tradition of giving the time and the place of the scene and of putting the characters on the stage afterwards. He simply opens a new scene with the same characters discussing a different matter, or with the same subject dealt with by different people at a time either years later or years before the previous scene. This change usually coincides with the end of one chapter and the beginning of a new one so as to allow the reader to understand the time/scene shift. Scenes from the past and from the future merge into each other incessantly and are often tied by Sterne's use of words – words which change themselves into something else or which constitute a chain throughout the events. This is the case in Book VIII (Chapters 14, 15, 16). In chapter 14 the widow Wadman is attempting to «blow my uncle Toby up». In the next chapter uncle Toby's situation is metaphorized as follows:

It is a great pity – but 'tis certain from every day's observation of man – that he may *be set on fire like a candle, at either end* – provided there is a sufficient wick standing out; if there is not – there is an end of the affair; and if there is – *by lighting it at the bottom*, as the flame in that case has the misfortune generally to put out itself – there's an end of the affair again.

For my part, could I always have the ordering of it which way I would be burnt myself – for I cannot bear thoughts of being burnt like a beast – I would oblige a housewife constantly *to light me at the top*; for then I should *burn down* decently to the socket; that is, from my head to my heart, from my heart to my liver, from my liver to my bowels, and so on by the meseraick veins and arteries, through all the

turns and lateral insertion of the intestines and their tunicles to the *blind gut*. (ch. 15, my italics here and below)¹

Before returning to the widow and the candle, Tristram shifts the action using the same images, recalling the earlier passages, verbal cues and metaphors:

- I beseech you, doctor Slop, quoth my uncle Toby, interrupting him as he mentioned *the blind gut*, in a discourse with my father the night my mother was brought to bed of me - I beseech you, quoth my uncle Toby, to tell me which is *the blind gut*; for, old as I am, I vow I do not know to this day where it lies. The *blind gut*, answered doctor Slop, lies betwixt the Illion and the Colon.
- In a man? said my father.
- 'Tis precisely the same, cried doctor Slop, in a woman - (ch. 15).
- And so to make sure of both systems, Mrs. Wadman predetermined to *light my uncle Toby* at this end or that; but *like a prodigal's candle, to light him*, if possible, at both ends at once. (ch. 16).

The movement of the association is almost circular: blowing up, lighting a candle, burning to the blind gut, blind gut, lighting the candle at both ends, in a sort of endless vortex.

* * *

The chain of words constitutes one of the ways in which events are related to one another. And it is inevitable, talking of chains of words to point out that Sterne is indebted to Locke's association of ideas, (although Sterne uses Locke's assumptions as a comic device)², and that his method can be considered as one of the first attempts at stream of consciousness³. The time and the events of the story are in fact wrapped in Tristram's consciousness and are the product of his own mind. The reader is invited to listen to Tristram's «opinions» and ideas, and what are opinions but expression of one's own consciousness?

¹ Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, The Modern Library, New York, 1928.

All references to this text will be made parenthetically: ordinal numbers will refer to the volume, cardinal numbers to the chapter. As I am using italics myself all italics in the text have been removed.

² Cp. John Traugott, «The Shandean Comic Vision of Locke», *Laurence Sterne, A Collection of Critical Essays*, John Traugott ed., Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliff, (1968): 126-147.

³ Arthur H. Cash, «The Lockean Psychology of *Tristram Shandy*», *English Literary History*, XXII, (1955), 125.

«Tristram's personality dominates the novel, and Tristram's avowed purpose is to reveal his character and what kind of mortal he is. In this sense *Tristram Shandy* is the first stream of consciousness novel».

Of course, Tristram's thoughts are not laid out on the page at random, but are coherently associated with each other, thus creating a singular mixture which is neither pure stream of consciousness nor pure Lockean association, but an original creation which defies classification.

The moment of convergence of time past and time present, of time lived and time created⁴, is the space of the individual's consciousness, and the reader is exposed to events «thought» rather than to events «lived», to a «book of history on what's going on inside a human head» (II, 2). External and internal life, although apparently following parallel lines, are very different: time as «chronology» is rather regular and its spatiality is always the same; time as «feeling» is anarchistic, one minute might seem as long as one year and viceversa:

It is two hours, and ten minutes – and no more – cried my father, looking at his watch, since Dr. Slop and Obadiah arrived – and I know not how it happens, brother Toby – but to my imagination it seems almost an age [...] – 'Tis owing entirely, quoth my uncle Toby, to the succession of our ideas. (III, 18).

In the succession of ideas what becomes relevant is the perception of ourselves, the life which flows in the mind rather than what goes on externally; the existence we know best and of which we are most secure is our own, of all other objects we have only a superficial and external experience. In the «existence» of the mind memory is always there pushing our past into the present. Duration then becomes non-measurable, and is only to be felt. On the one hand we have chronological duration, which is the only one we can attempt to measure, on the other we have «une durée qui se tend, se resserre, s'intensifie de plus en plus: à la limite serait l'éternité. Non plus l'éternité conceptuelle, qui est une éternité de mort, mais une éternité de vie. Eternité vivante et par conséquent mouvante encore, où notre durée à nous se retrouverait comme les vibrations dans la lumière, et qui serait la concrétion de tante durée comme la matérialité en est l'éparpillement»⁵.

Tristram Shandy can be seen as the attempt at an affirmation of life against death, as an endless struggle for birth and eternity. Tristram's use of memory makes life go on incessantly, makes everything present now, at this moment, as we read, as the author writes. The author challenges time, duration and space, melting together past

⁴ Cp. Jean-Jacques Mayoux, «Temps veçu et temps crée dans *Tristram Shandy*», *Poétique*, II, (1970): 174-86.

⁵ Henri Louis Bergson, *Mémoire et Vie*, P.U.F., 1975, 14.

and future, making different experiences live together in the same spatial moment. Although in his struggle with time he complains that

I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volums – and no farther than my first day's life – 'tis demonstrative that I have three hundreds and sixtyfour days more life to write just now, than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work [...] – on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back – [...] at this rate I should live 364 times faster than I should write – (IV, 13)

he nevertheless succeeds in his attempt doubling the time created, double-living his past experiences, anticipating time and being in three different places simultaneously:

I have got *entirely out of Auxerre in this journey which I am writing now*, and I am got *half way out of Auxerre in that which I shall write hereafter* [...] for *I am this moment* walking across the market-place of Auxerre with my father and my uncle Toby, in our way back to dinner – and *I am this moment* also entering Lyons with my postchaise broke into a thousand pieces-and *I am moreover this moment* in a handsome pavilion built by Pringello, upon the banks of Garonne, which Mons. Sliigniac has lent me, and *where I now sit* rhapsodizing all these affairs. (VII, 28)

These past-presents, these future-presents are introduced simultaneously through suspended scenes and events. Time can be suspended and this is Tristram's way of deceiving death: if he can stop time then he can stop and overcome death as well. The famous episode of uncle Toby and his pipe is a good example of the device. In chapter 21 of Book I, uncle Toby's action of «taking his pipe from his mouth and striking the head of it two or three times» is suspended for two pages and then recollected: «But I forget my uncle Toby, whom *all this while* we have left knocking the ashes out of his tobacco-pipe». After many chapters (Book II, 6) of suspension uncle Toby can finally complete his movement: «I think, replied my uncle Toby, – taking, as I told you, his pipe from his mouth, and striking the ashes out of it as he began his sentence...». But «*all this while*» is not real time, and Tristram has attained his first victory, for, as long as he can suspend his story and his characters, he can wander back and forth through past and future as the «god of Creation». Time belongs here to the writer-creator, the time of the story is at his disposal from the beginning, and what is to be written is of a double nature: it is past and it is future, just as with the cow which «*broke in tomorrow morning*» (III, 38). The double level is rendered through the use of grammar and words which transmute, change and transport the reader along the paths of Tristram's mind.

Another similar occurrence is to be found in III, 11, «when the door, hastily opening *in the next chapter*, but one-put [now] an end to the affair».

* * *

Tristram is always interrupting actions and events in order to start afresh with other memories, and those interruptions, far from being disruptive, are further evidence of Tristram's mastering position: what Tristram interrupts are not actions happening in a time lived but actions recollected and happening in a time created, and as a creator Tristram can manipulate them at length, transforming them into weapons in his battle with time. He controls his characters and his material at will, and although the scenes concerning his family circle are set in the past (the time created), they also belong to the present whenever Tristram chooses to bring them before us.

* * *

The theme of the struggle with Death and Time is magnificently exemplified in two main instances: the first is the resurrection of Yorick who dies in I, 12, but who, after the black page, representing either his tomb, or his voyage to hereafter and return, (or, as a more hazardous guess, a moment of temporal void where Yorick the «dead» and Tristram the «not yet born» can meet), is, like Lazarus, brought back to life by the same author-creator who made him die.

The resurrection of Yorick is one of the most important statements against time as a destroyer. «Tempus *not* edax rerum» can be Tristram's motto. He states his power and his position as opposed to the relentless action of time, and the whole structure of the «novel» points at the agon with time. Although in fact the events recalled are centered around the years 1713-1723, the story begins in 1718 and ends in 1714, that is four years before its beginning.

The second instance, if we can call it so, is the entire Book VII. The paradoxical reconstruction of time-sequence in this book has a particular function of disclosing Tristram's concerns and convictions: the presence of Auxerre and Lyon, and the phantoms of time past are removed from our consciousness, and the only thing which matters is *now*, this instant, while he is writing and his pen traces word after word on the page. It is the instant lived, the present which is being actualized in this very moment of the creative process. Book VII marks a turning point in the economy of the work. It is here, in

fact, that the account of Tristram's life comes to an end and after that uncle Toby's story takes over.

Book VII is the epitome of Tristram's existence for here he becomes his own story, and the book reflects the general movement of the «novel»: as a whole the «novel» is in fact the story of Tristram's journey through life, from his begetting onwards in search of salvation and health. The journey of book VII embodies the main motive; it is a «dance» with death where death «runs more risks»⁶ than Tristram himself, where Tristram «will lead him [death] a dance he little thinks of» (VII, 1). It is in Book VII that death, come to claim his prey, is, at least temporarily, defeated.

1.1. *Celle sans qui nous ne serions pas*

But if «to stand still, or get on but slowly, is death and the devil», it also means to avoid sex. Book VII is, in addition, the book of the great refusal and denial:

She looked amiable! – Why could I not live, and end my days thus? Just Disposer of our joys and sorrows, cried I, *why could not a man sit down in the lap of content here – and dance, and sing, and say his prayers, and go to Heaven with this nut-brown maid?* Capriciously did she bend her head on one side, and dance up insidious – Then *'tis time to dance off*, quoth I; so changing only partners and tunes, I *danced it away* from Lunel to Montpellier – from thence to Pescas, Beziers, – I *danced it along* through Narbonne, Carcasson and Castle Naudairy, till at last I *danced myself into Perdrillo's pavillon*, where pulling out a paper of black lines, that I might go on straight forwards, without digression or parenthesis, in my uncle Toby's amours – (VII, 43).

Staying is impossible; staying will assume the significance of accepting death as natural: sex, birth, death. To be born is to be prepared to face death as part of our being, thus, the flight from Nannette and sex which is essential to the birth, and the difficulty that the characters encounter in coupling. The only possible life is the life lived through the «paper of black lines». As the sexual tension increases in the scene of the dance, («We want a cavalier, said she, holding out both her hands, as if to offer them – And a cavalier ye shall have; said I, taking hold of both of them. Hadst thou Nannette, been arrayed like a duchess! – But that cursed slit in

⁶ Thomas M. Columbus, «Tristram's Dance with Death», *University Dayton Review* VIII, ii, (1971): 3-15.

thy petticoat! Nannette cared not for it»), staying becomes unbearable and Tristram is compelled to dance away.

* * *

The theme of the dance has been part of the Book from the beginning, but what a shift in emphasis! «I will lead him [Death] a dance he little thinks of [...] to the world's end, where, if he follows me, I pray God he may break his neck» said Tristram, although he knew that it was a dance «without music». Now, that he can dance with life to the sound of music, he cannot stay, nor face the fact that staying will inevitably lead to a physical action, to a concrete statement against impotency and frigidity. Sexual fulfilment will be «death» for him, so he has to dance away. He can challenge death and time in his own imagination, but he cannot accept the materiality of a real battle on death's own territory, that is on the field of concrete, although transient, actions.

«So much of motion is so much of life, and so much of joy, [...] to stand still [...] is death and the devil», but when he is given the possibility of getting life and joy he reverses the terms of the equation, because accepting joy and life is accepting sex, and accepting sex is accepting to stay, so then:

sex = joy and life = staying = death

As he endlessly needs to get «out of the body, in order to think well» (VII, 13), he finds an intellectual alibi for his escape and goes on with uncle Toby's story.

What Tristram escapes from is in reality not death itself, separated and isolated from any context, but death as acceptance, and what he fails to acknowledge is that death is not opposed to life, but to the «conscience of life». Death in fact «ne s'oppose pas à la vie, mais à la conscience de la vie. Or cette conscience est déjà le fruit de la négation de l'animalité, soit dans un certain sens, d'une mise à mort. Par conséquent, dans un univers au moins partiellement objectif, la mort se présente comme une négation de la Négation»⁷.

The theme of sexual refusal and denial is to be found from the beginning of Tristram's story; Tristram delays even his own begetting and birth. He experiences pain and anguish since his parents'

⁷ Michel Feher, *Conjurations de la violence, Introduction à la lecture de Georges Bataille*, P.U.F., 1981, 23.

sexuality will inexorably lead to his birth and, consequently, to his death. He *has* to suspend them. And when, at last, he cannot put off time any longer, he still has to face his anguish as derived from that single moment of sexual fulfilment.

J'exige – autour de moi, s'étend le vide, l'obscurité du monde réel – j'existe, je demeure aveugle, dans l'*angoisse*: chacun des autres est tout autre que moi, je ne sens rien de ce qu'il sent, si j'envisage ma venue au monde – liée à la naissance puis à la conjonction d'un homme et d'une femme, et même, à l'instant de la conjonction – une chance unique décida de la possibilité de ce MOI que je suis: en dernier ressort l'improbabilité folle du seul être sans lequel, pour MOI rien ne serait. La plus petite différence dans la suite dont je suis le terme; au lieu de MOI avide d'être moi, il n'y aurait quant à MOI que le néant, comme si j'étais mort. Cette improbabilité infinie d'où je viens et au-dessous de moi comme un vide: ma présence, au-dessous de ce vide, est comme l'exercice d'un fragile pouvoir, comme si ce vide exigeait le défi que je lui porte MOI, moi c'est-à-dire l'improbabilité infinie, douloureuse, d'un être irremplaçable que je suis. Dans l'abandon où je suis perdu, la connaissance empirique de ma similitude avec d'autres est indifférente car l'essence du moi tient à ceci que rien jamais ne le pourra remplacer: dans le monde ou je demeure comme lui *étant étranger, étranger absolument*⁸.

A stranger to the world Tristram really is until he reaches Book VII and meets Nannette and the «ring of Pleasure» (VII, 43):

Tie me up this tress instantly, said Nannette, putting a piece of string into my hand – *it taught me to forget I was a stranger* – the whole knot fell down – We had been seven years acquainted. (VII, 43).

It is at the cry of «VIVA LA JOIA! FIDON LA TRISTESSA!», in the moment of the recognition and acceptance on the part of the merry crowd, that Tristram feels the impulse to run away once more. If he is successful in escaping death, he is even more successful in flying from life itself. He makes a statement of rejection, of refusal of, and escape from, sexuality and life. He cannot accept the life of his body and the consequences of it; until now he has lived in his imagination, creating through his mind, manipulating characters, temporality and spatiality; now he is forced to face a world which cannot be manipulated, to accept the motions and the existence of a body which cannot be controlled.

Until Book VII he has striven, with a certain amount of success, to suspend time in order to suspend death, and he has, therefore, suspended all physical accomplishments. To let his body have its own way would be to limit his mental faculty as it is only in the

⁸ Georges Bataille, «L'expérience Interieure – La Mort est en un sens une imposture», *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, (1973), V, 83-84.

mind that he can live on different time-levels contemporaneously. Leaving this secure world in order to accept the world of the body would be to accept real existence as well, and this Tristram is unable to do.

«In his [...] confrontation of the temporal and the spatial, [...] [he] raises the issues of man's confrontation with death and of the relationship of art to man's mortality»⁹. Art as the offspring of the mind will live forever, while all offsprings of the body are transient and therefore destined to die. The literary creations of the past are not subject to laws of time; they can live together with the newborn works. In the life of the body, however, generations leave space to new generations through the means of death. Death incessantly creates the necessary place for the newborn. Birth and death are indissolubly tied; death is «celle sans qui nous ne serions pas»¹⁰, without death we shall not have birth and, as Tristram perceives, without birth there will not be death.

Death and sexuality are, then, the two great enemies Tristram fights all along his work. At moments he seems to win the battles he meets with, but his victories are bound to the world of intellect; as long as he keeps the battlefield on the «paper of black lines», he is sure to win, but whenever he attempts to move out of the book and carry his battles on other levels, he *has*, although reluctantly, to fly back to the page, seeking salvation. Death and sexuality belong inexorably together, and although, at first, they can be seen as a form of negation, on the contrary they embody the hidden truth whose externalization is life itself.

There is not a better way to utter this thought than in Georges Bataille's words:

Le luxe de la mort est enviagé par nous de la même façon que celui de la sexualité, d'abord comme une négation de nous mêmes, puis, en un renversement soudain, comme la vérité profonde du mouvement dont la vie est l'exposition¹¹.

⁹ William Bowman Piper, «Time's Chariot and *Tristram Shandy*», *Image and Immortality*, William Holts ed., Providence, Brown Univ. Press, (1970), 125.

¹⁰ Georges Bataille, «La Parte Maudite, Introduction théorique, Les Trois Luxes de la Nature: La Manducation, la Mort et la Reproduction Sexuée», *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, (1976), VII, 41.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 41.