IS SEX NECESSARY?: *TRISTRAM SHANDY'S* BEND SINISTER

Dr. Daniel THOMIÈRES[1]

Abstract

This paper is concerned with certain problems raised by the interpretation of literary texts. It offers a number of interrogations that have to do with questions of semantics and pragmatics. How do texts belonging to the past make sense when they are read in new contexts that their authors could not have predicted? I argue that one of the main purposes of a close reading is to discover symptoms that can be arranged into patterns which will help us look at ourselves and at the world in new ways. More specifically, this paper focuses on the notion of crisis. There are times when our identity and our relations to others and society at large appear to have lost their stability. The examples that will be analysed mainly deal with issues involving sex and procreation and are borrowed from Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1760-1767) and virtually never touched upon in the current critical literature on the novel. Why do we still read and enjoy *Tristram Shandy* in the 21st Century, even though our culture has changed and our reading habits are different? What does it reveal to us about our crises?

Keywords: Crisis, otherness, identity, sexuality, Laurence Sterne, contexts

Is sex necessary? My readers need not worry, I am only asking a question… Are questions necessary? (Well, that is a second question…) There could also be — at least — a third question: Why do (good) writers write? I believe that these three questions are important and have to be asked. If my readers do not agree with me, let us be clear about one thing: It is pointless for them to read what comes next, which brings me to my fourth and last question — for today… — Is the role of literary criticism to ask questions not yet asked?

No-one will deny that Laurence Sterne asked and asked himself a great many questions. I'd offer that this is one of the surest ways we recognize a 'good' writer. A good writer avoids repeating other writers. (No, Sterne did not repeat Rabelais, Cervantes or Molière. He recreated them.) Repetition paves the way for the accumulation of clichés that characterize mediocre writers.

There are whole areas of Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* that have been overlooked by critics[2]. I propose to go back to the novel and analyse of these passages. How do we know that the passages rarely if ever studied were not essential for Sterne? (If these passages were not essential, Sterne would not have written them). I see Sterne as a highly perceptive and intelligent man who could not refrain from asking questions. Did he ever take anything for granted? I suppose that his sense of humour prevented him from doing so. The problem here is more than a problem of humour.

[1] Dr., University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne, France

[2] As there are so many different editions of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, providing page reference seems especially useless. Bible commentators have come up with a handy solution to a somewhat similar problem. They speak of chapter and verse. I am not suggesting that our novel is a new sacred text, but in this paper reference will be to volume and chapter.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

Sterne seems to have developed an obsession for areas that point to problems, to what is wrong with people, with society, with time. It is tempting to read the novel as a collection of symptoms[3]. Sterne was a parson. That is indeed perfectly true. He was also in his own way a physician, with perhaps a difference. He mainly points to the symptoms, arranges them, but fails to provide the diagnosis and the treatment.

To begin with, he wasn't a philosopher or a sociologist. More importantly, he did not possess the historical hindsight which is at our disposal two centuries and a half later. Yet, he intuitively felt that a number things did not tally. He described them. He did not explain them. My contention is that today we can perhaps make sense of them with our own mental categories. Our cultural habits have changed. So have our reading habits. We are also aware of what came after Sterne, whether in history or in literature. It is impossible for us not to look at *Tristram Shandy* with our 21st century eyes. I obviously do not deny that studying the novel in its original context[4] is pointless, but it certainly is extremely limited. To take only one example, we live in a post-Freudian culture. The word 'Freud' does no refer to an Austrian thinker, but to the recognition that the human subject functions along certain lines such as being characterized by a body, an unconscious, by being (more than) largely governed by sexual drives, by having a more or less perverse relationship to the Law, etc. Sterne intuitively knew all that. He did not have to read Austrian thinkers. As a rule, writers tend to discover these elusive realities more quickly than theoreticians[5].

I think that we may safely say that Laurence Sterne is both a 18th Century writer and a 21st Century writer. (He is also incidentally a 16th Century writer and Tristram is unquestionably Hamlet's brother). That is precisely why his book makes sense to us today. It provides us with problems and patterns that help us look at ourselves and at the

[3] I am referring to Gilles Deleuze's pronouncements when he explained that writers are (like) physicians. See his *Essays Critical and Clinical*, especially the first chapter, "Literature and Life." Deleuze briefly gives some examples: Herman Melville, Thomas Wolfe, Franz Kafka, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, etc. Laurence Sterne could certainly constitute a valuable addition to that list. The term 'diagnosis' means collecting symptoms and establishing distinctions between them (*dia*) and then producing a body of knowledge (*gnosis*) that can later be used critically in order to enhance life. Following Deleuze in this respect, my claim is that, among other functions, literature helps us discover for ourselves new possibilities to relate to myself, others and, if one chooses to believe in it, to the divine.

[4] I am mainly thinking of books like Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel*. The title of Keymer's book is, however, somewhat misleading. He places *Tristram Shandy* in the context of other 18th Century novels. His erudition is impressive, but the entreprise hardly original. I believe that it is high time someone studied Sterne's book as a 21th Century literary text, which it unquestionably is.... Of course, asking that question implies first asking oneself what a text is, what the act of reading and of contructing meaning consists in, and how we can relate to documents coming to us from the past.

[5] Freud admitted as much at the beginning of *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's "Gradiva"* (1907): "The poets are our precious allies and their testimony is to take into careful consideration, since they usually know also a quantity of things between sky and earth that our philosophy doesn't suspect. Particularly in the knowledge of the spirit by far they surpass us, because they go to sources that have not been yet open to science. […] In their knowledge of the mind they are far in advance of us everyday people, for they draw upon sources which we have not yet opened up for science". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 9:8.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

world and hopefully develop new possibilities of life. Otherwise, why would we go on reading it? Certain not to amass a body of knowledge on 18th Century British literature…[6]

Sex is at least one of three areas of Sterne's novel that haven't generated in-depth studies[7], together with writing (do we need a wound or an accident in order to feel the need to write?) and language (Sterne writes after Locke, and — just like David Hume[8] — he develops in his own way a number of potentialities of British empiricism). My subject will be manhood. It is difficult not to recognize that Sterne's characters (and his narrator who is also a character) lead us to ask questions about identity and our place in society. The reasons why I chose Sterne are basically threefold. He was a most inquisitive mind and did not seem to harbour too many prejudices. Secondly, he lived at a turning point, that is broadly speaking between the 17th Century and the 19th Century. I mean that he was relatively free to use his mind the way he wanted. Religious conflicts and the need to takes sides were over. On the other hand, capitalism and imperialism had not yet imposed their mark on English society. (The South Sea Bubble had been a failure, as Tristram's father painfully knows, and that kind of scheme seemed to people at that time to be a

[6] I am thinking of Richard Rorty's contribution to Umberto Eco *at al, Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. See his article, "The Pragmatist's Progress." To summarize his point, we could say that there are basically two reasons why we read literary texts. First, we may wish to arrive at a scientific body of knowledge about the text, in the same away as a biologist tries to discover facts about the germs in his or her test-tube. That is the approach which is usually followed in schools and universities. We commonly say that our conclusions must be as objective as possible. We could call this approach the point of view of God. You look at an object from the outside and endeavor to discover the truth about it by means of induction and/or hypotheses and deductions. The approach is unquestionably legitimate. Interpretative semantics especially has made a lot of progress over the last twenty years. (An excellent example of this approach can be found in François Rastier's own brand of interpretative semantics, including a full consideration of the cultural components of texts and of course of their fundamental ambiguity. See his 1997 *Meaning and Textuality*. A good interpretation covers as many details as possible. Conversely, the author of a good interpretation—a student or an instructor—must not project himself or herself upon the text. The aim of an interpretation is to be as objective and unbiased as possible. In other words, we wish to reach an interpretation that will be considered true. Truth in this respect means an exact correspondence between the text and what we say or think about it. Intuitively, one feels that something essential is missing in such an approach of literary texts. It is certainly not sufficient in itself. The problem is that it simply ignores the question is why in the first place why read books, why we think, talk, dream, possibly quarrel about books. There is thus a second, completely different reason why we read literary texts. Rorty speaks of pragmatism in this respect. Books and especially literary books have something to do with us, with our bodies, our minds, our desires, our unconscious, about what is most individual, personal and specific in us. Besides, we all know that a book doesn't have one meaning. The meaning of a book is not something fixed for all eternity. It changes over time. Homer or Shakespeare certainly did not forseee the implications that we find today in what they wrote. (Well, who knows after all…? They were really great writers!) It is true to say that the cultures, groups and sub-groups to which they belonged were extremely different from our own cultures. It would thus seem that a pragmatic approach to literary texts could prove more relevant than one focusing solely on interpretation. By relevant, I mean that that approach would be close to the way literature actually functions. In other words, a text—or at least some aspects of it— has to become actualised by a reader—that is, it has to exert an action on the reader's mind and/or body.

[7] The problems raised in this paper have practically never been touched upon in the abundant critical literature devoted to *Tristram Shandy*. A welcome exception is Dennis Allen's excellent contribution. See Dennis W. Allen: "Sexuality/Textuality in *Tristram Shandy*." The question is also dealt with, though in a much more superficial manner in Ruth Perry, "Words for Sex: The Verbal-Sexual Continuum in *Tristram Shandy*."

[8] There are unfortunately few extremely studies of the links between Sterne and Hume. The two men knew each other well. They had met in the *Salons* of the Encyclopédistes in Paris and the Scottish philosopher is said to have declared that *Tristram Standy* was the best novel he had ever read. My contention is that Sterne is at least as bold and original as Hume when it comes to push to the extreme the consequences of Locke's empiricist intuitions. There would appear to be only one article that really broaches the problem. See Christina Lupton, "*Tristram Shandy*, David Hume, and Epistemological Fiction."

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

thing of the past… In addition, Black people have souls, as Sterne's narrator asserts several times. Blessed period…) Thirdly, Sterne was confronted to an almost imperceptible evolution in society. He obviously could not name it. The phrase 'Industrial Revolution' appeared in the 1840s under the pen of Friedrich Engels, then later that of Arnold Toynbee. Yet, Mr. Shandy is a small, impoverished country squire lost somewhere in the middle of Yorkshire who simply needs to enclose the common known as Ox-Moor (IV/XXXI) in order to exploit it… The Industrial Revolution has begun. Mr Shandy is the man who started it. Laurence Sterne thus did not know the phrase 'Industrial Revolution', yet he shows the symptoms and connected them to a number of personal and social problems. For Mr. Shandy, just like for his son, "the time looks out of joint." I willl offer that maybe we still read *Tristram Shandy* today because in our way we also feel that the time is out of joint, that our identity is a problem and not a certainty, and that simply "the times, they are changing…" and so are we. It is probable that, for instance, Herman Melville felt the same malaise in the 1850s when he saw America losing its values before being swallowed by the American Industrial Revolution too, or William Faulkner in the 1920s when the American South emerged from something not very far from the Middle Ages. Tristram is not only a cousin of Hamlet, but also a cousin of Pierre and Quentin. By which, I mean that *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* is of course a 18th Century novel, but also that it is a book that offers a number of essential truths about life, gender, identity and society. In other words, it is a modern book, that is to say a book that makes sense beyond the context in which it was written[9].

My question is thus why we are so often tempted to rename Sterne's novel and call it "The Fall of the House of Shandy"? Why does the author paint such a dismal picture of a family whose elder son dies unmarried and the second (our narrator) is sexually impotent? More importantly, why doesn't the father seem to care about the loss of the name of his family?

fathers and the teleological dream

Put in a nutshell, Sterne clearly doesn't believe in the stability of reality. For him, it is most unlikely that self or world were given once and for all. In a sense, Tristram Shandy is the complete opposite of Tom Jones, to limit ourselves to an example everybody will

[9] Does this idea need to be reiterated at every generation? The lastest notable development on the theme is probably Jacques Derrida, *Limited, Inc*.. See especially the essay "Signature Event Context". Communication — which includes literary communication — is anything but harmonious. If one assigns to the interpretation of a text the aim of discovering the intention of its author, one is unquestionably the victim of illusions, especially if one believes that, with the discovery of what is seen as a truth — as Truth? —, the process naturally comes to an end. On the contrary, what should matters to us is the infinity of connections a given text can establish with an infinity of contexts that cannot be predicted. (A context of course involves a subject with a body, an unconscious, a personal history, etc. A context also implies being part of a community, not to say several sub-communities, which are all more or less characterized by conflicts. The Garden of Eden no longer exists...) Why try and place *Tristram Shandy* primarily in a 18th century context, especially as, it should be noted, there are hundreds of antagonistic 18th century contexts... A given text is most certainly made up of a large number of layers of details. That is a point no-one disputes. The problem confronting literary research should be to determine, for instance, in what way the conflicts we discover in a text belonging to the past helps us make sense of our own contemporary conflicts.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

understand. Tom possesses an essence. Fielding's novel relates the discovery of that essence. Its hero perceives — correctly or not — situations, obstacles, and then he reacts to them, and thus acts. What matters is always what is achieved next. Indeed, the plot of the novel lists a series of items Tom lacks, and, at the end of the book, he finds himself in full possession of his rightful name, identity, house, fortune, etc. He then also enjoys social recognition and of course he has gained a wife, love, and happiness. It also goes without saying that his children will perpetuate his (rightful) name. Tristam reaches none of these things at the end of Sterne's book. Indeed, at least on one point, the ending of Sterne's book is perfectly clear: Tristram is a problem. He never understands the present situation. He never really acts. The sole possibility for him is to keep running. We don't even know where he physically is, apart from the fact that he has been given some sort of hospitality near Toulouse in the South of France where he is in the course of writing volume VII of his novel. We only surmise that he is (still) alive. Barely… He no longer has a home. Exile is the only world the adult Tristram knows. Sterne unquestionably refuses to write a novel which describes the discovery of a hidden truth. For him, neither our bodies, nor our identity are stable. The same is true of space, objects, and more generally of society and history which are just as problematic. If asked, we may suppose that a philosopher like David Hume would explain that Tom Jones relies on habits. Henri Bergson, as for him, who in the first half of the 20th Century revolutionized the way we think about time, would speak of sensor-motor mechanisms. Tom Jones possesses an intuitive advance knowledge of what he has to connect in order to achieve a result. On the contrary, Tristram Shandy just doesn't know what comes next. In fact, he rarely looks towards the future. (When he does, it is to try and ward off death). On the contrary, he plunges into the past. He does so in a completely non-teleological manner. The time is out of joint and Tristram is a latter-day Hamlet. Time, identity, manhood, and meaning elude him. With Sterne, there are no happy endings. There are no dénouements. There are only knots and problems — and time doesn't stop. In other words, he seems to be a paramount example of the writer who reveals the absence of teleology.

It follows that in his day *Tristram Shandy* clearly broke with a number of traditions. (That is most probably the — epistemological? — reason why we still value Sterne today. He is first of all the man who breaks with traditions, who asks us not to take anything for granted). Judging from the novel, it looks as if the 1750s represented an important turning point in English society. Said very briefly, a certain facile optimism had gone. Time no longer was a colourless medium. It had become a problem, which means that Tristram doesn't live in any sort of smooth chronological temporality. His minds keeps constructing connections between the future (into which he is running away in an attempt to escape the hand of death) and the past (into which he plunges in an endless quest to try and seize upon his origin). He is virtually never in the present. Of course, we may wonder to what extent he is typical. Maybe, Tristram is just an unlucky little fellow. The problem is that chance is meaningless by definition. There is nothing you can say about it. Or, maybe, his life cannot proceed by means of sensor-motor mechanisms as the world has

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

changed, which would then signify that Tristram is not an exception. He is out of joint because the time is out of joint, that is because his society and the values of that society are undergoing a crisis. Can we say that Sterne was aware of that crisis, even though he could not come up with a name for it? In other words, speaking of manhood also implies taking societies — and more generally politics — into consideration. (No man is an island… Sterne may not have read Donne, but that was something he certainly was fully aware of.) What could people do in the new context in which they found themselves? Walter Shandy is a failure. Elizabeth Shandy, *née* Mollineux, chooses resistance in her own unassuming manner. Tristram, as for him, tries to escape— as if exile had become now the fate of modern man.

When he tackles these problems, Sterne's favorite technique is systematically ironical. In his case, the technique always implies two movements: a pronouncement (usually by the father) which is juxtaposed by what actually happens in reality: the father was wrong, or he failed miserably. In *Tristram Shandy*, fathers and uncles are made to ridiculous. That is of course good old comedy. But the problem is also ideological: Patriarchy is based on an illusion. Walter Shandy constantly defends very traditional conceptions. At the same time, his family is destroyed, he simply has no power, and in addition he never appears as an paragon of manhood himself. It is true that the narrator never seems to criticize his father. Yet, readers who look closely at the details of the book and at their implications never fail to understand that the author has embarked on a thorough enterprise of deconstruction of patriarchy.

Walter Shandy happens to be a father. It's a position you find yourself in. The position has little to do with biology, as we learn early on in the novel that it is most unlikely that Walter is Tristram's 'biological' father. (More about that vexed problem later). Is he Bobby's father? Maybe he is, maybe he isn't. The book doesn't offer any evidence either way. We may thus safely assume that Sterne wanted to show that fatherhood is something that has to do with the roles you play, the power you exert, the rights you enjoy and the (very few) duties you have to perform. Walter is very thorough and systematic in his exercise of his fatherhood. Or, rather, we should say that Sterne is very thorough and systematic in the way he portrays Mr. Shandy, his pretensions, and the failures that never fail to follow.

In this respect, Mr. Shandy is a complete 'father.' To use our 21st Century parlance, he combines theory, practise, myths, symbols, and — what we now call after Wittgenstein — 'language games.' The theory comes from Robert Filmer, the 17th Century political writer whose *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings* (1680), advocating the divine rights of kings, remained a best-seller well into the 18th Century. Walter especially borrows Filmer's idea (I/18) according to which the king was the father of his country. Walter simply reverses the metaphor: the father is king in his family. There remains to be seen if Filmer's ideas only represent an ideal for Walter, or if they are actually put into practise. (Again, more about that later…) In any case, Walter knows that power is always better exercised in families and in societies when it is accompanied by symbols. Kings

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

have crowns inherited from their ancestors. Walter, as for him, has boots — also inherited from his ancestors (III/22). The shift from head to feet is perhaps not entirely significant, or, rather, it wouldn't be, if Corporal Trim had not damaged the hereditary symbol in order to improve Uncle Toby's bowling green. How unfortunate! In addition, Walter suffers perhaps one of his greatest defeats when the parson arrives to christen the new baby (and future narrator). Here again, the father of course bequeaths his 'family' name, but it is also among his prerogatives to choose his son's christian name without asking anyone else's opinion, least of all that of his wife. In the end, however, the child is not called Trismegistus, but Tristram. How *triste*…

One must recognize that things got to a bad start as far as Tristram's conception is concerned. I mean that it was certainly a bad start for the narrator. He repeatedly insists on that point. But it was also a resounding defeat for Walter. Sex education had not yet been invented in those days, but it was amply sufficient to read the wise Hippocrates in order to learn everything you always wanted to ask about babies. It was thus widely believed in the Middle Ages that what we call today the father's sperm was in fact some fluid carrying among other things the humunculus, that is to say a miniature image of the human to be born. Of course, the little man was modelled on his father's image, in the same way as man is made in the image of God. (The fact was Hippocrates was not a Christian was seen as irrelevant…) Why then, when little Tristram was officially conceived on Sunday, March 25th, 1718, did Mrs. Shandy proffer the second most famous quotation in English literature (after *To be or not to be*…): "*Pray, my dear,* […] *have you not forgot to wind up the clock?*" (I/1)? Mr. Shandy consequently loses a lot of the concentration he understandably needs to perform his monthly marital duty. The narrator then supposes that the poor humunculus did not reach its destination in the mother's womb in the best of conditions (thereby creating the first broken line for which the text is famous, as if straight lines were only an illusion)[10]. More seriously, one may wonder why a woman (who, as the text points out, was like all other respectable women of her time and never asked questions) should suddenly ask a question… Well, didn't we say that *Tristram Shandy* is mainly a book about questions?

In any case, the distinction is perfectly clear. Men use language. Women keep mum and obey. It's all very neat and traditional. Mr. Shandy is a master of what we now call the 'performative,' which is a language game that seems to represent a sort of ideal for him. How to do things with words… The novel contains two very interesting examples. The first has to do with the christening of the baby, which ends in complete discomfiture for the father. The second consists in a complete transcript of the Shandys' marriage contract. The soon to be Mrs. Shandy not only says "I do," but she also has to consent to a very long series of obligations concerning her body, the way she should deliver babies, her rights (very few) and her duties (several pages). Any reader of the book knows, however,

[10] Readers interested in an original reflection on straight/broken lines and sexuality can turn to Michael Hardin, "Is There a Straight Line in This Text?: The Homoerotics of *Tristram Shandy*."

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

that things never go as planned. It is a case of men's power over women's bodies, or perhaps we should say, of men's power *versus* chance. Chance wins.

Walter Shandy's personal conception of identity rests on a contrast between men and women, the latter being of course — as everyone knows — inferior and — as we will see — possibly unnecessary. In point of fact, the crisis comes from the father. It is as if he was unconsciously planning the end of the Shandys. Things begin in a very traditional manner. For instance, he considers that women are but "*venters*" (IV/29). Walter uses the old spelling of the French word "ventre," meaning belly, a rather derogatory term to refer to his wife's womb. Indeed, the father is an old pedant who believes that he is a great scholar and he worships the Ancients, especially when he looks upon conception in terms of humunculuses (I/1). Of course, if the soul and the identity of the baby come from the father, the mother's role is only to provide it passively with food and warmth inside her "*venter*" for nine months. The fascination Walter Shandy derives from the debate on inheriting at the Visitation Dinner will not come as a surprise (IV/29). It is perfectly established that a child will inherit from his parents after their deaths, but the object of this learned controversy is to ascertain whether parents may inherit from their child if the latter dies first. The discussion strangely concerns mothers, as if fathers did not exist. The problem is here to limit the rights of mothers. The answer is: a mother may not inherit from her child, for the reason that, if the child is obviously of the blood of the mother, the mother is (obviously?) not of the blood of the child… For these men, it has basically to do with a problem of blood, or rather seed: the child did not beget his mother.

Walter Shandy thus pushes to its extreme a male-centered logic and he does not hesitate to take the last step when he states that the world could certainly very well live without women. Is sex necessary? We have to recognize that Walter is never without a theory. In this respect, he actually proposes two. Two is always better than one… Walter's immediate purpose is to try and prevent Toby from marrying the widow Wadham. Walter first concedes that sex is indeed necessary (IX/33), but only for society which needs to continue to exist and thus requires its members to produce children. Walter says that he is unable to understand why people associate sex with other notions. It is only a need, just like life food or sleep. No less, no more. The problem is that people usually associate it with modesty and hide in order to have sex. They are of course wrong. It is in fact not different from war which is also something necessary. We make war publicly. We should also make love publicly, if only to remove any special privilege that might be attached to it. People also (rightly) associate it with passions, which in Walter's view very clearly indicates what is wrong with it. Passions turn us into animals or fools (the same thing, of course…) And passion is linked to women who will always spread confusion and chaos in society unless they are maintained in their proper place.

Walter Shandy's second theory is freely adapted from Plato's *Symposium* (VIII/33). He proudly explains to his brother that there are two kinds of love. One is of course superior and the second inferior. The first comes down from Heaven along a golden chain and it creates in us a taste for truth and philosophy. The second, however, is part of

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

nature. It is the love that Venus created and that appeals to our senses. Walter praises the first one without any hesitation. The conclusion is unavoidable: with heavenly love, there is no place for mothers… There is no place for procreation either. Walter's conclusion is absurd. And the correct conclusion readers of the novel are supposed to arrive at is that implied by Sterne: mothers are at least as essential as fathers.

Walter is a man who lives for his ideas, his 'hypotheses.' Just like Friedrich Nietzsche one hundred years later[11], Sterne knows that there is no language without metaphors. Even Locke, who kept saying that he disapproved of metaphors, needed his wax, his *tabula rasa* and his lantern[12]. Walter Shandy has a strange compulsion to repeat almost systematically the word 'engender.' In his case, engendering seems to have become a man's job. Walter keeps thus conceiving and engendering ideas (Cf. for instance II/7, II/9, VI/2.) An perfectly explicit passage speaks of an idea of his "as notable and curious a dissertation as ever was engendered in the womb of speculation; —it was some months before my father could get an opportunity to be safely deliver'd of it." (II/7). THe House of Shandy is thus the seat of two pregnancies: the mother's and the father's. The latter never needed a woman. Men can conceive on their own. An old immemorial dream has come true…

Are women necessary? Walter has no hesitation. For him, the principle appears to be satisfactory established. At least, in theory. Sterne did not have to read Sigmund Freud to know that supposedly rational principles have very often extremely little to do with real life. Maybe that is due to the fact that the novelist was a true empiricist and that he knew that it is preposterous to separate the mind from the body. It would appear that, intuitively, Sterne discovered what Freud called repression, a concept which has always to be considered in connexion with its consequence: that which is repressed always returns. Walter represses women in his theories and, to a lesser extent, sex. They return with a vengeance. That is a truly universal phenomenon, equally shared by men and women. No difference then between the two sexes in that respect? The two nuns of the Andoüillets instinctively and very precisely knew what this is about (VII/23). Careful readers also usually notice the strange habit Walter Shandy has of displaying that most peculiarly tendency of his to rub his hand over his cod-piece when a problem tickles his mind (especially when he raves against sex…). Hasn't Walter Shandy reinvented the art of masturbation, as well as the just as old art of hiding it? And masturbation may not be a truth universally acknowledged, but is unquestionably a secret practise unanimously shared. Uncle Toby too has repressed what we today would call his libido, but it returns when he is on his bowling-green. It is as if he too had unconsciously discovered how easy it is to have sex without a woman. His model town is in fact always the same basic

[11] Jacques Derrida reiterates that most necessary — though slightly paradoxical — conclusion in relation to Nietzsche in his famous essay, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" in his collection *Margins of Philosophy*. In Walter Shandy's case, metaphors are not an ornamental figure of speech. They reveal indubitable truths about his deep personality.

[12] Locke introduces the lantern metaphor to illustrate his theory of knowledge in his *Essay*, Book II.14.9. Sterne alludes to it in *Tristram Shandy* III/18.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

structure which is modified to suit the cities mentioned in the Gazette bringing the latest news from the war on the Continent. It is simply made up of four walls with a hole inside, the whole being surrounded by a (most pubic) hedge. Toby is his true brother's brother. Walter said that sex was like war. Toby makes war and love at the same time. His main (daily) hobby-horse consists in firing with his cannon into the hole. When the war ends with the Peace of Utrecht, Toby has to give up his bowling-green. He then focuses his libido on the widow next door. At least for a short time… A real woman, however, is not a fit companion for Uncle Toby.

That is a point Sterne understood perfectly. To a large extent, his book is an attempt at answering a most crucial question: what is a couple? In it, couples constitute a sort of formal system. It all starts with the preparations for Mrs. Shandy's confinement. There are symbolically two levels. One should in fact speak of the two floors (stories?) of the house: three men downstairs (Walter, Toby, and Dr. Slop) and three women above (Mrs. Shandy, the maid Susanna, and the midwife). These two antagonistic worlds which have nothing in common. More generally, there is actually something strange in Sterne's book in that there are no genuinely real heterosexual couples in it. The real couples are male. One is made up of the father and the uncle. It should never be forgotten that it is Uncle Toby who suggests to his brother to draw up the very constraining marriage contract. Understand that women's bodies are not to be trusted… In addition, he admittedly may seem to be criticizing his brother's follies and 'hypotheses,' whistling "Lilliburlero" in order not to be obliged to listen to them, but in key moments the Uncle unobtrusively takes his brother's hand behind his armchair. Male solidarity never fails. The other couple is of course that of master and servant, Toby and Trim (T & T?) They share the same values. It looks as if it is the servant who is teaching the master. In this respect, it is very illuminating to examine Trim's sex life. We are told of two different episodes. The first concerns a Béguine in Belgium who looks after him when he is wounded. In a famous scene, she caresses his thigh, her hand slowly moving upward. Suddenly, the narration stops. Where did the hand stop? We will never know. In any case, the nun disappears from the novel and from Trim's life. That nun was obviously an admirable nurse, as have always been a lot of other Roman catholic nurses, though probably in the case of nuns people normally don't associate them with pornographic connotations. What then was so special with Trim's nurse? The text spends a lot of time telling us that she was a Béguine, that is that she belonged to a minor religious order whose members were allowed to marry. Is that detail redundant? Why didn't Trim just meet a more traditional nun?

The answer to that question seems to lie in the second episode of what we know of Trim's love life, or rather, sex life. When Toby starts courting the Widow Wadham, it goes without saying that Trim also starts courting her servant, Bridget. Another formal system is here constituted. Being a perfect gentleman, or should we say the owner of a libido, Trim takes the young woman for a walk at night-fall. He offers to show her Toby's mock fortifications (that he actually built himself), especially the bridge, which

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

unexpectedly breaks down under their combined weights. Is the accident symbolic? (Sterne never wants us to take things at face value, and one does not see why there should suddenly be an exception) Was Bridget the happy (or unhappy?) loser of her virginity on that occasion? The question is surely pointless. The narrator won't tell us. On the other hand, what happens next is important. Bridget disappears from Trim's life and from Sterne's book. The pattern is apparently here the same as that of the Béguine. When they eventually go visiting the Widow in her house, the Corporal makes an impassioned speech to his master which he accompanies with a flourish of his cane. The meaning of his gesture is immediately expressed clearly in the book: man will only be happy when he is a bachelor. In this way, Trim manages to get Toby to look with nostalgia towards the bowling-green. It is no surprise that Toby's subsequent attempt at proposing fails. (Besides, Trim keeps repeating that marriage is always associated with danger. He especially likes reminding everybody that his brother married a Jewish person in Portugal and was later arrested and tortured by the Inquisition). The real couple will be reunited after the danger, and T. and T. will spend the rest of their lives together. Toby has been a good pupil. Trim has been a good teacher[13].

coitus interruptus, bis repetita, & ad nauseam

Sterne's novels is about the symptoms of a crisis. The crisis doesn't just concern one person. It is not limited to one family. It seems general, as if not only people were sick, but society as well. Did Sterne feel that the 1750s represented a turning point? In any case, gone is the teleology of Tom Jones *et al.* In Fielding's novels, sex and procreation are ultimately linked, and, in the end, personal happiness for those characters that have merited it and the principle of the continuation of society are reconciled. In other words, sex affords personal pleasure and at the same time children are produced and they will enable society to continue. Kierkegaard would contend that the aesthetic principle (the

[13] One of the most remarkable features of Sterne's narrative technique is the way he juxtaposes viewpoints. It is of course clear that some of these viewpoints are expressed in words — men's — whereas others have to be carefully reconstructed by readers who are forced to read between the lines if they wish to understand that second category of viewpoints — women's. In the novel men are particularly blind. They usually are the mental prisoners of the past. On the other hand, someone like Mrs. Shandy is unquestionably on the side of life, as opposed to her husband who proves constantly unable of adapting to changing times. A first contrast is easy to notice at first reading. Women care, which is certainly a very traditional role for them. For instance, when Tristram's penis is nearly cut, his father us usual launches into a series of learned speeches. Women do not separate the mind from the body. Another way of freeing oneself from these sterile scholastic distinctions? Mrs. Shandy is also curious, which is something her husband finds extremely difficult to understand. He berates her when she spies on Toby who is about to enter the Widow's House (VIII/35 & IX/1). He believes that her intentions betray some kind of unhealthy lust. In fact, we are later told that her eye is perfectly pure, without a single speck of desire in it. Her curiosity is about life, marriage, possibly children. Perhaps her greatest act of treachery against her husband's power and (at the same time) her greatest feat in expressing herself lies in the child's hasty christening. Mr. Shandy is summoned in the middle of the night by the maid Susanna who explains to him that the baby's face is black and that he has to be immediately baptised before it dies. The maid then rushes to the mother's parlour at a speed the father cannot follow. His pressing problem is that at that time of the night he doesn't have his breeches and that it will take him a fair amount of time to put them on. When the father arrives, it is too late. Not for the baby, who strangely looks now perfectly pink and healthy, but for the name. We reach here a nodal point of the novel. I refer to Ralph Flores's suggestive remarks in Ralph Flores, "Changeling Fatherhood", in *The Rhetoric of Doubtful Authority*.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

point of view of the individual, i.e. moments of intensity) and the ethical principle (marriage and continuity) are united[14]. Or, rather, he never said such a thing. As the title of his most famous work implies, it is *either* aesthetics *or* ethics. For Sterne, strangely enough, it is, however, *neither*… *nor*… Is then Tristram an 18th Century Hamlet unable to love a woman and also unable to produce children and an heir to the House of Shandy? There apparently is something rotten in Yorkshire…

Maybe one handy way of describing the relationships between sexes in *Tristram Shandy* could be to borrow that famous pronouncement that the French psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan kept repeating *ad nauseam*: "Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel"[15]. Will we also say that there is no sexual rapport? In fact, Sterne is a hundred times more pessimistic than the French psychoanalyst. Lacan never intended to say that there is no sex. There are bodies connecting and interpenetrating each other. What he meant was that there is no rapport between genders, and more specifically that men and women will never communicate, let alone discover some sort of communion in the sex act. It is as if they were not on the same wave length (to use our trite 20th Century phrase) when their bodies touch and give them sexual pleasure. The idea that the two partners see the same things or images at the same time is an illusion, like for instance that of the androgyne in Plato's *Symposium* whose two halves could be reunited if one could find the right partner. Individuals are isolated and exile is their inexorable fate away from a home that no longer exists and that perhaps never truly was a home. Do we need to add that love is an empty word? Did such a thing ever exist outside cheap popular novels?

There is something far worse in Sterne's book. Even sex doesn't exist… Sexual intercourse never ever succeeds. That indeed could be a general law which we might deduce from the book. One of the consequences of that failure is that society will no longer be able to reproduce itself. Such is the crux of the crisis: people no longer believe in society. In this respect, the novel raises an extremely important question (and doesn't answer it): why is there a bend sinister on the door of the Shandy coach? There should evidently be a bend dexter as the family is legitimate. We learn that the painter made the mistake. The problem is that Mr. Shandy never bothered to have his coat of arms rectified. It is as if he had accepted the fact that his name doesn't matter and, if it disappeared, that would not appear to be a problem. Lacan would say that Walter Shandy does not believe in the Name of the Father… Mrs Shandy doesn't either. Nor does Tristram… As a consequence, the family falls apart. Belief is what holds the world and families together…

[14] Søren Kierkegaard in what is certainly his most famous opus, *Enten-Eller* (1843, translated into English as *Either/Or*).

[15] "Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel". All along his life, Jacques Lacan kept returning to this formula. Readers interested in its implications and developments are advised to turn to the published version of his Seminar XX, *Séminaire XX: "Encore"* (1973-1975), pp. 131-132. Lacan adds by way of explanation: "Le rapport sexuel est ce qui ne cesse pas de ne pas s'écrire." (Sexual rapport is what which never stops not writing itself.) There is little doubt that Laurence Sterne would have heartily approved: he literally never stops writing about sexual relationships in order to tell us that no such thing will ever take place…

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

Interestingly enough, when Sterne writes about his male characters, there is always something that remains indecidable. Are they sexually impotent? The question is repeatedly asked in relation to Uncle Toby. There is no need to insist. The father is another case in point. It is most likely that Tristram is not his biological son. What about Bobby? We will never know. The only thing that seems to be certain is that the Shandy bull is impotent, which constitutes a bit of a problem in a story that on its last page claims to be a "cock and bull" story... In *Tristram Shandy*, they shoot cocks and bulls, don't they? And when a bull is no longer a symbol, a man is no longer a man. The problem is probably linked to the wound. In its own way, it appears as a primal cause. And yet, in itself it is nothing, an accident, a rock that flew when a wall was shattered by a cannon ball at the battle of Namur. Yet the wound reverberates throughout the novel. It is decidedly exceedingly contagious, not in a medical sense, but symbolically. The family is sick, as is probably the whole society too. Poor Tristram is regularly wounded: his nose is smashed when he is born, part his penis (which part?) is severed by a window, his lungs are consumptive, and he appears to be impotent. (Jenny, his lady-friend, is very understanding in that respect). Even the name intended for him suffers a blow when he is christened Tristram instead of Trismegistus (the Greek equivalent of the Egyptian Thoth, the God of Truth who also incidentally invented writing)[16]. The name and the penis… They are placed exactly on the same level. It is a sort of curse. These people will not inherit a name, only impotence and the wound. Perhaps, we should say it in more philosophical terms: they will never be complete. Only Trismegistus was complete.

It follows that *Tristram Shandy* can be read as a long collection of instances of *coituses interruptus*. Things start at the beginning when Mrs. Shandy asks her famous question. (Do I need to remind my faithful readers that the two previous months, the two spouses could not have their monthly intercourse as Mr. Shandy was suffering from sciatica, which is indeed apparently a most common (and contagious?) ailment, as the widow Wadham's husband also suffered from it with the consequences one can very easily imagine !) Then examples accumulate. Maybe we should not include the mad Maria of Book VII. It is however true that she became mad because she was prevented from marrying the man she wanted. Uncle Toby helps Le Fever, a dying soldier, who lost his wife one night when he was having sex with her…(VI/7) The Roman General Cornelius Gallus suffered the same misadventure, except that it was he who died (V/4). In France, the family later hears the story of two lovers separated by "cruel parents, and by still more cruel destiny," Amanda and Amandus. When they were at long last able to be reunited, they both fell dead… (VII/31) Book IV begins with the long tale of Julia and Diego who finally become reconciled in Lyons after a long exile away from each other. What can they possibly do when they meet again? They look into each other's eyes, but if they look up, their chins clash, and when they look down, so do their foreheads…(IV/1) Their eyes try to establish a relationship, but their bodies won't allow it. This technical (and symbolic)

[16] Some of these ideas are alluded to, but never really developed in Ross King, "*Tristram Shandy* and the Wound of Language."

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

problem is of course caused by Diego's nose which is inordinately long. Julia originally went away because she could bring herself to believe that that nose was real. She thus brought about the crisis. (A nose is a nose, the narrator insists. No-one of course ever imagined it could be a metaphor for another bodily organ… Cf. V/1) Crises are always brought about by a lack of trust, an inability to believe. Would Trim then be the exception that confirms the rule? He admittedly does not belong to the gentry, and consequently does not have to follow aristocratic principles such as starting a family and perpetuating his name. He certainly does not start a family with Bridget, and, in his first sexual adventure, the nun's hand stops short of his groin. Always the groin…

Tristram's adventures in the 21st Century

My original question had to do why we go on reading *Tristram Shandy* today. Are we 21st Century Tristrams, the way it is possible to be a 21st Century Hamlet (or the way Tristram was to all intents and purposes an 18th Century Hamlet?) I imagine some of us are. I suppose that that is occasionally my case, the way it can one day be true of anyone else, when our psychological make up and the social context in which we find ourselves invite us or forces us do so. I have first addressed a problem of semantics, trying to find in the wealth of details that constitute the novel as many implications as possible concerning psyche and society. The problem is also linked to questions of pragmatics. How does the text help us look at ourselves and at the world? It is undeniable that when we read, we find abstract patterns, oppositions, displacements, questions, etc. that may lead us to discover new possibilities of life (if of course we wish to open ourselves in such a way…) Marcel Proust, who is so close to Laurence Sterne, expressed the point in a very convincing way. In a passage of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust's narrator remembers that, when he was a child at Combray, he had seen ready-made glasses in the window of an optician's. In fact, that sort of glasses which don't require a doctor's prescription can still be found today in our supermarkets. Of course, you have to try on a lot of them before you find the one that fits your eye-sight. Books are like these glasses. They enable us to see reality a little better. If you prefer, they offer a sort of framework that leads us to discover distinctions and patterns of which we had not been aware before. We see things that were there outside or inside ourselves but that we had not noticed. What is important is the notion of interaction. What you see depends of the world of course, of the glasses evidently, but also of that great mystery which is yourself, your consciousness and your unconscious[17].

There is no doubt that Proust is Sterne's brother. His book, exactly like *Tristram Shandy*, is a quest, or a *Bildungsroman*, if one prefers. It deals with the education of his

[17] I borrow this reference from Gilles Deleuze's classic book, *Proust and Signs*. Deleuze offers us a wonderful insight into the possibilities inherent in *Rememberance of Things Past*. It is to be noted that Deleuze always felt a strong attraction for American pragmatism. He repeatedly said that William James was a genius in philosophy, in the same way as his brother Henry was a literary genius. On the possible links between James and Deleuze, the following article will prove very suggestive: David Lapoujade, "From Transcendental Empiricism to Worker Nomadism: William James", *Pli*, 9, 200, 190-199.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

protagonist[18]. In other words, it looks towards the future, and not towards the past as a lot of people mistakenly believe. In Sterne's book, the wound is an accident. In itself, it represents a meaningless cause. Its only function is to start a process, to get the characters to find a meaning for it, and construct their lives accordingly. Its real meaning is thus in the future. It has to be re-invented all the time. Should we say that the wound is what makes associations of ideas necessary? We know that *Tristram Shandy* and its quest mainly proceed by means of associations of ideas[19]. Two logics are possible, whether one chooses to look at things in an empiricist way or not. Sterne has made his choice. He is a disciple of Locke and a contemporary of Hume. The great invention of empiricism, as it was developed by Hume in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, was not so much that ideas come from our sensations, but that our mind produces new operations all the time in order to connect our ideas. What matters first and foremost has to do with these operations. They do not reproduce innate models. Tristram's quest offers a good example of these mental operations. A non empiricist logic, on the other hand, would decide that objects possess a predetermined meaning: Tom Jones is the nephew of Squire Allworthy. All that is needed for the novel to end is to uncover that truth. Gilles Deleuze — playing on the sounds of the French language — says that that is the logic of the "*est*" (*to be*), and that we are sure that we will eventually find the meaning or essences of things[20]. On the contrary, an empiricist logic stresses the "*et*" (*and*): thinking is a quest that piles up operations one after the other. The meaning of my life is thus "the wound and *a*", then "the wound and *b*", *c*, *d*, etc. This open-ended quest will only stop when I die. (Not everyone will agree. Some people possess deeply imbedded certainties about themselves, the world, and God. It would be a tragedy if their lives were suddenly to cease being strictly repetitive. Sterne, who admittedly was a Church of England parson, did not seem to harbour such certainties. He clearly relished questions, puzzles, quests, and new viewpoints).

Apart from his dazzling talent and sheer sense of fun, we still read Sterne today because he tells us what a turning point is, and more precisely what the symptoms implied

[18] Such indeed is the main point made by Gilles Deleuze in his book on Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.
[19] Locke introduced the principle underlying the associations of ideas in II.33 of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke believed that most of them were to be avoided, as they were due to "chance" or "habit," and thus did not faithfully reflect the outside world. The theory really became then an essential component of British empiricism with the publication of David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in 1748. Humes greatest contribution to philosophical thought was to have focused, not on sensations, but on the mental operations going on in our minds. He proved to be a revolutionary when he showed that (to quote Gilles Deleuze's own handy summary): "relations are external to their terms." It may be interesting to note that Deleuze, who is, with Henri Bergson, France's greatest empiricist, devoted his first published book precisely to the philosophy of David Hume, *Empirisme et subjectivité* (translated as *Empiricism and Subjectivity*). Sterne's contribution is very well documented in Chinmoy Nanerjee, "*Tristram Shandy* and the Association of Ideas." See also Peter M. Briggs, "Locke's *Essay* and the Tentativeness of *Tristram Shandy*."
[20] Gilles Deleuze, drawing his inspiration from David Hume's empiricism, develops this point at the beginning of the second part of his *Dialogues* (with Claire Parnet.)The two words are pronounced exactly in the same way in French. The function of "*est*" (is) is to attribute essences, that we suppose have always already been in existence. It is inseparable from the notions of being, whole and unity. On the other hand, "*et*" (and) invents new relations, it is on the side of multiplicities and is synonymous with life which never stops trying to escape ready-made, artificial distinctions.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

in turning points are and in what way we can arrange them in order to make them significant. We all at one moment in our lives find ourselves in that type of transitions when we lose our bearings and we no longer know whether we belong to the past or the future. What values should we then adapt? In what way should we act? In Sterne's case, it would seem that, with the advent of the 1750s, things would never be the same. Sterne's males have for instance nothing to do with Fielding's studs who discover their true place in society. The 18th Century was without questions a century of social and personal experimentation. Experimentation however had largely exhausted itself in 1750 and doubt was beginning to replace it. Later, urbanization and the Industrial Revolution imposed their hold and, after that, the 19th century marked the triumph of capitalism (in the economic field) and of patriarchy (at home). In the 19th Century, people knew where they belonged to. They had to. This problem is precisely that which Tristram and his father have to face: they simply no longer know where they stand. Mr. Shandy is a former merchant who became a country squire and who now finds that he can identify with none of these two roles. He has very little money left, and his legitimacy is constantly and painfully questioned. (When the Aunt Dinah doesn't marry her coachman, symbolically both the squire's mare and bull prove to be sexually impotent…)

The problem hinges around Tristram's father. He is a failed father. He neglects the mistake on his coat of arms. A coat of arms is of course meant to be a sort of "badge," if not in this case of courage, at the very least of manhood and aristocratic legitimacy. Your arms represent your identity in the eyes of others. More specifically, what follows is that symbolically the Shandy family is a family in which the Name of Father[21] is no longer something children have to accept and cling to. Tristram appears to be a genuine bastard who will never learn the name of his real father. Home disappears and life becomes synonymous with exile for him. Should we conclude that this break is ultimately caused by the weakness of a father who lives in the past and finds his only pleasure in quoting and repeating scraps of speeches made by famous ancient philosophers, and who moreover is unable to adapt to changing patterns in society at a time when the cash nexus is becoming the only value that matters? All he can do is enclose his common. Paradoxically, he keeps harping on traditional values, but he never puts them into practise. In other words, what Sterne seems to be telling us is that what is important is not what you say or think, but what you do. It is not your values, but your actions. Mr. Shandy never acts.

Apparently, the Shandy family has been unable to maintain a balance between what we might conveniently call the father's side and the mother's side. The father preaches a complete negation of the body and the passions. His only refuge is language, preferably empty words out of touch with reality. The mother, as for her, is conscious of the importance of sex, life and fertility. Of course, she is not allowed to express herself. How could their child find any sort of stability thanks to which he/she will be able to

[21] Just as he did with his negation of the "sexual rapport," Jacques Lacan returned to the concept of the "Nom du père" all along his life. Its first official appearance seemed to have been in his Seminar devoted to psychoses (1956-1957, published in French as *Séminaire III*, "Les Psychoses," Éditions du Seuil, 1981.)

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

build his/her identity? Tristram is thus characterized by an inability of connecting the law and his desires. He is never supported by the Name of the Father, which certainly explains why he doesn't believe in his father and why he is constantly making him look ridiculous and inefficient. It is as if he did not have a father. It is also as if he could not be a father himself. The last autobiographical passage of the novel (VII/43) ends with an alternative: *Viva la Joia!* versus *Fidon la Tristessa!* These Languedoc peasants surrounding Nannette enjoy life and its pleasures innocently. Tristram (curiously?) doesn't stay with them. He runs away as quickly as he can. His name is Tristram and his fate is *tristesse*…(That is to say something sinister, as the Latin etymology implies. He will never sit at the right hand of God. Like Cain, he will roam the earth until the day of his death). In addition, as Tristram is unable to effect the union of his desire and the Law, he can only enjoy pleasures that conform to his own private law. It is as if, long before Sigmund Freud, Laurence Sterne had discovered the aetiology of perversion[22]. It is unquestionable that the male Shandys — Tristram, his father and his uncle — cut a most strange figure in the 18th Century. They steadfastly ignore sexual intercourse and procreation. For them, sex is mainly something that has to do with language and wit (at least for Mr. Shandy and his son). Do we need to remind ourselves that one of the key lessons a man of the world like Walter Shandy teaches (twice!) his brother Toby (III/31) is that a woman possesses two sides, or rather two "crevices?" Which is the good one? Why this obsession for sodomy, which in fact is an obsession for the idea of sodomy? As far as Tristram is concerned, perversion seems to be a problem of fetishism. In the key scene with Nannette in France, the question is thus: the hair or the skirt? And, of course, the difficulty with the skirt is that there is a slit in it…

a year in Languedoc

The scene between Tristram and Nannette is undoudtedly a key moment of the novel (VII/43). It is part of what the narrator calls his "*PLAIN STORIES*." What seems to be at stake in these brief four pages is the way the subject encounters the others: the countryside which might be supposed to be empty contains more life than London! What sort of relationships will Tristram establish with the people he comes across by chance on his road? Among these, there are especially a lot of members of the opposite sex… Strangely enough (or not strangely enough?), strictly nothing happens. Maybe, readers are the victims of romantic clichés? When Tristram meets Nannette… What do we expect? Or, maybe, we have to recognize that we have become familiar with Sterne's book, and we are sure than the scene will be pornographic… The answer is that it is erotic, but definitely not graphic. Everything is hidden and no sexual rapport is possible.

The passage is important as it reveals to us a structure of desire. It shows precisely how perversion works, without telling us anything about Nannette. Nothing objectively suggests that she might have been sexually attracted by Tristram. She is apparently simply

[22] Freud analysed the notion in his famous 1927 article, "Fetischismus." One of the reasons why Freud devotes so much attention to fetishism is that its structure provides an abstract model enabling us to understand all perversions, and more particularly the role the subject towards social Law plays in it.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

enjoying herself after her day's work. The only textual detail mentioned in this respect concerns "a spark of amity" for Tristram. Nothing more. Besides, there is another couple present: a brother and her sister. Shall we assume that, for the young peasants, the whole episode is entirely innocent? The young man plays his flute. Well, in some cases, a nose is a nose… (Cf. the narrator's warning in his tentative "Chapter on Whiskers, " V/1.). Here, a flute is a flute… In other words, it is a question of point of view. For the Languedocian teenager and his sister, it is a flute. For the narrator, it is not a penis, but it could be one… The problem has nothing to do with anatomy, but with words and modal verbs.

The passage is thus important because it reveals what today we would call Tristram's unconscious. The narrator is systematically represented as a split self. Before accosting Nannette, he "kicks off one boot into this ditch, and t'other into that." At the same time, he rebukes his mule who is curiously enough put off by the young peasant girl… Are we supposed to remember that, for Tristram's father, an ass represents a person's body? Nannette paralyses Tristram's unconscious. In any case, the narrator retorts to his mule, "'Tis very well, sir, said I — I never will argue a point with one of your family, as long as I live." We dutifully note that Walter spoke of an ass. His son has a mule, by definition born of an ass and a mare. Mules are of course sterile. What "family" was then the narrator speaking of when he addressed the poor animal?

The symptom is here. Nannette has a body. She is a body, the slit, the possibility of genital sexuality. In addition, and perhaps foremost in Tristram's case, women are irretrievably linked to time. Tristram is running away from time and death. If he stops and stays with Nannette (a fantasy, as we saw, since nothing suggests that she requires more than a dancing partner), he knows very well that time and death will immediately catch up with him. Woman forces you to become part of two systems of differences: a vertical one which says that you have a father and that you will be a father in your turn, and a horizontal one, which says that it takes a man and a woman to achieve the aim of procreation. Tristram cannot accept either the sexual difference or the difference between generations.

The obsession is systematic. Tristram expresses it in a very moving way when he evokes Jenny. Who is Jenny? Answers vary in the course of the book. Mistress? Lady friend? Muse? We will say, she is *the* Woman. He needs her, he possibly invents her in order to talk of Woman. He thus explain: "I will not argue the matter: Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows my pen: the days and hours of it, more precious, my dear Jenny! than the rubies about thy neck, are flying over our heads like light clouds of a windy day, never to return more every thing presses on whilst thou art twisting that lock, see! it grows grey; and every time I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, and every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make." (IX/8). For Laurence Sterne, one conclusion at least is perfectly unambiguous: woman is time.

The narrator speaks in virtually the same terms of the young Janatone, the inn-keeper's daughter of Montreuil, near Calais, in Northern France (VII/9). This young

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

woman teases the narrator with the stocking she is threading. Or does she? The occupation is fairly innocent — and for her probably necessary. Maybe the narrator is imagining things, or would like us to imagine things. He tells us that he is tempted to draw her in "the wettest of draperies." Then, he strangely departs in a hurry. The following chapter immediately broaches the subject of death he is trying to shake off his scent. In the purest tradition of fetishism, it would appear that, for Tristram, Janatone is synonymous with a leg, or a stocking. In addition, like Nannette, whom she foreshadows, she hides and reveals — at least in his fantasy — part of her sexual organs, viz. her breasts. Nothing could be clearer a symbol of both sex and procreation than breasts… Finally, Tristram decides that he will not try to paint Janatone any further. He would very much prefer to describe the local church. It is made of stone and pretty impervious to the passage of time. On the contrary, as he says of that poor young woman, "thou carriest the principle of change within thy frame."

Later, much later, Sigmund Freud will explain to us that perversion is the subject's ultimate defense against madness[23]. Sterne had already guessed the truth. There are at bottom three positions: i) sanity, psychological balance, social integration, a position very few people inhabit. ii) madness and death, always a danger in the world of *Tristram Shandy*. iii) perversion, wit and language trying to ward off death and the horror of it. Locke was perfectly clear. Judgment reproduces reality. (That is an essential component of the first conception of empiricism: knowledge derives from our senses). Sterne knows, however, that you cannot reproduce reality, you cannot always and only be a husband and a father. Wit, as for it, implies mental operations not necessarily connected with the world outside our mind, or for that matter with innate, immortal models.[24] (That is the second conception of empiricism: knowledge is produced through new, original relationships constructed by our mind). Of course, it affords a lot of (selfish?) pleasure[25]. With Sterne, perversion is always a matter of wit and language. And, with these famous endless sexual innuendoes, it has been giving readers a fair amount amount of personal pleasure for about two centuries and a half.

The Nannette episode is without any doubt a most fascinating passage. Most of it reads like a dream sequence. Causal links between actions are in particular conspicuously absent. How is the tress undone? Things appear and disappear, and…, and…, and… Is this picture a temptation? The fleeting temptation of normality? The temptation of a

[23]Cf. Sigmund Freud's essay on fetishim mentioned above.

[24] In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Book II/11/2), John Locke, who unhesitatingly prefers judgment to wit, says that judgment "separating carefully, one from another, ideas wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another" whereas wit as "lying most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy".Howard Anderson's old article is still extremely worth reading in this respect. See Howard Anderson, "Associationism and Wit in *Tristram Shandy*", *Philological Quarterly*, 48/1, Jan. 1969.

[25] In *Either/Or*, Søren Kierkegaard, who most probably never read *Tristram Shandy*, opposed in the same way the ethical posture (marriage and procreation) and the aesthetic posture (moments of personal pleasure and intensity). Kierkegaard knew perfectly well that these two postures cannot be reconciled (except by religious faith, a belief the Church of England minister Laurence Sterne apparently does not entertain in his novel).

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

world which no longer exists, a world in which the dissociation between pleasure and society, wit and judgment had not yet taken place. It is certain that the narrator depicts some sort of Golden Age in the South of France, a pastoral universe such as the poets "in better days" would have painted. Nymphs and swains don't need to work, they play music and dance. Disease (the prevalent semantic field of the novel) is here completely absent. It is important to note too that, in the narrator's imagination, these four pages abound with circles: the mulberry tree, the ring of pleasure, the dance — a "*roundelay*," of course — with Nannette which lasts "seven years" (should we say a most symbolic figure, as, in a cyclical conception of time, life starts again, maybe not after the seventh year, but always after the seventh day?). The narrator feels the temptation: "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?" The fantasy is old like the world. The earth is a loving mother. On the other hand, happiness means enjoying pure and innocent relationships with a pretty young woman… It is almost a cliché… Womb and/or heaven, Sterne rediscovers the two oldest dreams of mankind: regression as escape.

Tristram is of course having a dream, and only a dream. The dancer are "carousing," that is dancing in a carrousel (if one stretches the etymology a little to add one additional circle to the text), or indulging in a bacchic orgy of sex and alcohol (to respect the correct etymology) ?

The slit in Nannette's petticoat is still visible when the narrator runs away.

A crisis is a series of symptoms that impose themselves upon us. Nothing coincides, myself, the others, society. There are different temporalities that will never be united[26], Nannette's present, the narrator caught between past and present, etc. There are territories which will always fall away us, as if exile was man's true fate. A crisis happens when we become conscious of these gaps, these rifts, these slits that will never ever be bridged. The slit is not only in the girl's petticoat at the end of Book VII of *Tristram Shandy*, it is irretrievably in my body and in my mind.

WORKS CITED

ALLEN, Dennis W., "Sexuality/Textuality in *Tristram Shandy*", *Studies in English Literature*, #25, 1985.

ANDERSON, Howard, "Associationism and Wit in *Tristram Shandy*", *Philological Quarterly*, 48/1, Jan. 1969.

BANERJEE, Chinmoy, "*Tristram Shandy* and the Association of Ideas", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15/4, Winter 1974.

[26] From an etymological point of point, the Greek "*crisis*" means a turning point in a disease. Nothing will be different ever after. More precisely, and as a consequence, the word points to the fact that you can now discern, distinguish, separate (that is the meaning of the word) two things, two levels, and of course two temporalities. A crisis alawys implies that it is no longer possible to connect.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

BRIGGS, Peter M., "Locke's *Essay* and the Tentativeness of *Tristram Shandy*", *Studies in Philology*, #82, 1985..

DELEUZE, Gilles (with Claire Parnet) *Dialogues*, Paris: Flammarion, 1977. English transl. *Dialogues*, London: Althone Press, 1987.

DELEUZE, Gilles, *Critique et clinique*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1993. English transl. *Essays Critical and Clinical*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

DELEUZE, Gilles, *Empirisme et subjectivité*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953. English transl. *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991)

DELEUZE, Gilles, *Proust et les signes*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964. English transl. *Proust and Signs*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000

DERRIDA, Jacques, *Limited, Inc*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1990. English transl. *Limited, Inc*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988. [The text devoted to John Searle is also published in *Margins of Philosophy*, Brighton Harvester Press, 1982.]

DERRIDA, Jacques, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972. English transl. *Margins of Philosophy*, Brighton Harvester Press, 1982.

ECO, Umberto *at al, Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

FLORES, Ralph, "Changeling Fatherhood", in *The Rhetoric of Doubtful Authority*, Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1984.

FREUD, Sigmund, "Der Wahn und die Träume in W. Jensen's '*Gradiva*.'", 1907. English transl. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (ed. James Strachey, 24 vols., 1953-74)*,* 9:8.

FREUD, Sigmund, "Fetischismus",.*Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, #13, 1927. Engl. transl. in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, #9 1928.

HARDIN, Michael, "Is There a Straight Line in This Text?: The Homoerotics of *Tristram Shandy*", *Orbis Literarum*, 54, 1999.

HUME, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1748, repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

KEYMER, Thomas, *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Enten/Eller*, Copenhagen, 1843. English transl. *Either/Or*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

KING, Ross, "*Tristram Shandy* and the Wound of Language", *Studies in Philology*, 92/3, Summer 1995.

LACAN, Jacques, *Le Séminaire*, Livre III, "*Les Psychoses*", Paris: Éditions du Seuil, collection "Le Champ freudien," 1981. English transl. *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, New York, Norton, 1998.

LACAN, Jacques, *Le Séminaire*, Livre XX, "*Encore*", Paris: Éditions du Seuil, collection "Le Champ freudien," 1975. English transl. Seminar III: Psychoses*,* New York, Norton, 1981.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)

LOCKE, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690, repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

LUPTON, Christina, "*Tristram Shandy*, David Hume, and Epistemological Fiction", *Philosophy and Literature*, 27/1, April 2003.

PERRY, Ruth, "Words for Sex: The Verbal-Sexual Continuum in *Tristram Shandy*", *Studies in the Novel*, #20, 1988.

RASTIER, François, *Meaning and Textuality*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.

STERNE Laurence, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, nine books, 1760-1767. *The Florida Edition of The Works of Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy*, volume III, ed. Melwyn New, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1984.

BDD-A2924 © 2012 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:42 UTC)