

darling! because my blood can sing: Contours of Lust and Sensibility in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*

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Abstract

As Viktor Shklovsky describes in his *Theory of Prose* (1929), Laurence Sterne's masterwork *Tristram Shandy* (1767) can storm the most proficient of readers with an overwhelming "sense of chaos". In fact, critics have amply discussed the novel's innovative treatment of fictional possibilities, where language as a medium receives an undeniable prominence. However, another topic of interest stands out in Sterne's critical heritage, that of an apparent qualitative antagonism regarding sexuality and sensibility: as demonstrated by numerous critical reviews of the time, physicality is deemed unbecoming within the novel's sensitive landscape. The main purpose of this paper is to consider how sexual practices and expressions of sensibility overlap in verbal and non-verbal discourse, forming inherent connotative symbolism. Moreover, it seeks to establish relevant connections between the author's manifold intertextuality and contemporary understanding of anatomical dissociation, its sociological outcomes, and, most importantly, how they manifest tangibly within the narrative.

Keywords: Literature; Laurence Sterne; Sexuality; Sensibility; Science; Criticism

Resumo

Como Viktor Shklovsky descreve na sua *Teoria da Prosa* (1929), a obra-prima de Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (1767), pode invadir o mais proficiente dos leitores com uma esmagadora "sensação de caos". De facto, a crítica tem discutido amplamente o seu tratamento inovador das possibilidades da ficção, no qual a linguagem como meio recebe uma proeminência inegável. Contudo, outro tópico de interesse destaca-se no património crítico de Sterne, o de um aparente antagonismo qualitativo concernindo a sexualidade e a sensibilidade: como demonstrado por numerosas recensões críticas da época, a fisicalidade é entendida como imprópria na paisagem sensível do romance. O principal intuito deste artigo é o de ponderar como práticas sexuais e expressões de sensibilidade coincidem no discurso verbal e não-verbal, formando um simbolismo conotativo inerente. Ademais, procura estabelecer conexões

relevantes entre a intertextualidade múltipla do autor e o entendimento contemporâneo de dissociação anatômica, os seus efeitos sociológicos, e, sobretudo, como estes se manifestam de forma tangível na narrativa.

Palavras-chave: Literatura; Laurence Sterne; Sexualidade; Sensibilidade; Ciência; Crítica

. . . REASON is, half of it, SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the
measure of our present appetites and concoctions . . .

– Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (7.13)

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
– the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other; then
laugh, leaning in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis

– e.e. cummings, “since feeling is first”

In his 1827 commentary to the *Edinburgh Herald*, Thomas Carlyle marvels at the apparent conflict found within sensibility and humour.² The British essayist's concerns are indeed undeniably conscious of their current atmosphere: it seems that the general tendency of early criticism on Laurence Sterne's notable work *Tristram Shandy*³ recurrently gravitates towards this exact anxiety: whether fine feeling can be reaped from minds “coarse and callous” (qtd. in Howes 379).

Indeed, one can picture an entirely new theory of anxiety of influence applied to the diachronic transfiguration of a work's criticism. Dynamics of legacy, mediation, completion and antithesis⁴ rule the inevitably intertextual exercise of any creation - medieval *marginalia*, for instance, are an admirable case of how commentary composes a renewed textual cosmology. As a result, it seems legitimate to observe how Carlyle's nineteenth-century critique of the “shallow endowment” of humour unfounded in matters of the heart⁵ flows from a fixed chain of thought. Beyond Samuel Johnson's nearly epigrammatic remark on the novel,⁶ Owen Ruffhead refutes an exercise of “Folly” and “want of *Discretion*” of a writer “worse beluted and bemired

than the . . . squab Doctor” (qtd. in Howes 121). Ralph Griffith underlines a defeat regarding “what is *proposed* and what is *done*” in supposedly half-witted “preliminary scrap” (*TS* 441*⁷). Langhorne, however, regrets the clergyman’s breach of character⁸ by the use of “obscenity as wit” (qtd. in Howes 141), a positional concern shared by the anonymous author of a letter to the *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*:

Whether the using of immodest words, and the want of decency, always imply want of sense; . . . or whether, on the contrary, such freedom, may not, on certain occasions, be the result of good sense; I will not take it upon me absolutely to determine But how far it is excusable in any author, especially one who wears the gown, to gratify and promote a prevailing corrupted taste, either directly or indirectly, let himself and the world judge. I again repeat that it is really great pity he has not shewn more delicacy in this particular, for otherwise the book is truly excellent in its kind. (qtd. in Howes 63)

Yet, ensuing responses often praise later volumes. Carlyle’s piece is assumedly more benevolent than most of its antecedents: it acknowledges Sterne as the “finest” among his peers, achieving a heartfelt quality devoid of a “bitter and caustic rind” - as is, according to the author, the case with Swift and Johnson (qtd. in Howes 380); Bulwer-Lytton would too admit a similar view of synchronic antagonism.⁹ Unsurprisingly, Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim are recurring honourable mentions: to Samuel Richardson, their “admirable characterisation” embroiders a silver lining on “gross and vulgar tales” (qtd. in Howes 129).

As a result, it is possible to gather that the aforementioned tradition of reception appears to convey an impression of severance: the expression of sexuality as humoristic discourse blemishes the recognised brilliance of fervent emotion, lauded by its “extreme tenderness of feeling” (Hazlitt, qtd. in Howes 361). Nevertheless, I find it is worth acknowledging Frank Brady’s conciliatory view of inescapable association. While admitting that a disjunctive analysis is not as feasible,¹⁰ one is more eager to trust that humanness is equally “lyrical” and “devilish” (*TS* 8.13: 351): an attempt at rupture “merely brings them together at the drop of a hat” (Brady 53). The purpose of this essay is therefore to discuss how this dialectic of sentiment and sensation is, in fact, a fundamental element in *TS*’s structure, a propelling - and digressing, as it is inevitable to mention - mechanism in the complex clockwork where intertextuality, formal experimentalism and innovative carving of language are indispensable cogs. Moreover, its line of research endeavours to expand on relevant undercurrents of

interpretation: most particularly, the novel's exegesis on the vortex-like constructions of gender and anatomy commanding the scientific and sociological discourse of the eighteenth-century.

Few would dispute the impact of Laurence Sterne's treatment of sentiment in the - as Singh asserts, unfortunately unattended¹¹ - following practices of the theme. In fact, as Tim Parnell defends, "perhaps more than any other aspect . . . [it] has been consistently misunderstood" (*TS* 498*). According to the author, Sterne frames sentiment devoid of ironic undertones derived from hyperbolic *pathos*. It may seem odd to admit that an authorial voice as "critic of critics" as Sterne's would surrender to "sacrific[ing] his own preference for wit in the interests of a readership hungry for *pathos*"¹² (*ibidem* 491*), a possibility Parnell only partially admits as a means of financial sustenance; however, such a pragmatic reading seems generalised and incomplete (*ibidem**). Following this line of reasoning, it may be problematic to accept a trite tear-jerking device if one ponders the fondness expressed in Sterne's letter to Lady¹³ -, or his "epitaph" of "kindred tempers" addressed to Mrs. James.¹⁴ Moreover, it would seem spiteful to presume that sentiment must be considered "an aberration of Sterne's sickly final years": as Parnell befittingly concludes, pathetic landscapes "are consistent features of *Tristram Shandy*", "not a licence to emote indiscriminately" (*ibidem* 495*). An approach based on conjectural senility - and a supposed movement towards feeling blooming from feebleness - fails to recognize that sexual humour remains firmly present until the concluding paragraph.

Therefore, must delivery of sentiment be seen as an "unusual" twist of events devised for "relief" (Brady 51) to erotically impregnated discourse? To consider sensibility as "a different key" (*ibidem*) is to betray an idea of necessary disparity between phenomena, a reiterated disposition in the work's early criticism. A breaking of the fourth wall frequently restricts the space between narration and reception: by censuring "gravity" as "design, and consequently deceit" (*TS* 1.11: 20), self-preaching intellectuals are presented parading "beggarly accounts of a little learning, tinselled over with a few words which glitter, but convey little light and less warmth" (4.26: 204), neglecting that "the soul and body are joint-sharers in every thing they get" (9.13: 391). The novel ardently compels us to examine the moments when "the *extreams* of DELICACY and the beginnings of CONCUPISCENCE" (5.1: 224) continually converge. The ambiguity in these encounters vastly enriches the tender, heart-healthy atmosphere that brings delight and banishes LA TRISTESSA (7.PLAIN STORIES: 342), the ultimate Shandean intent (4.32: 216). Therefore, as it can be acknowledged, intrinsically distinct keys can coexist in a progression without causing bewilderment:

that is, I tend not to recognise one full-fledged harmonic division, but rather the presence of inversions and developments of the same fundamental chords.

Firstly, it seems inescapable to analyse the work's handling of sexuality not merely by its behavioural outcomes: what academic and cultural forces enact these patterns? In fact, *TS* braids old and new anatomies, often disconnected from their contextual framework and “juxtaposed in an often arbitrary and relativist fashion” (Hawley, “The Anatomy of *Tristram Shandy*” 479*). The scientific mosaic composed by ancient humoral readings and eighteenth-century research supporting the interests of vitalism and iatromechanics in human development, as Hawley explains, are not to be taken merely as a strict, unyielding theoretical background, but as a pliable landscape of character experimentalism for novelists.¹⁵

As fittingly exposed by Karen Harvey in “The Century of Sex? Gender, Bodies, and Sexuality in the Long Eighteenth Century” (2002), eighteenth-century historiography “posit[s] this period as the century of change in the ways in which the bodies were understood, sexuality constructed, and sexual activity carried out” (900). The reordering of sexual anatomy's understanding to a “two-sex model”, recurring to Laqueur's proposed terminology, progressively effaced the biological foundations of the “one-sex model”, a structural correspondence between male and female genitalia supported by the ancient humoral system amply mentioned in *TS*.¹⁶ Following this reasoning, *TS*'s *Argumentum ad Rem* seems oddly representative and revealing, as it strives for enlightenment over “the right end of a woman”: “. . . let them likewise be kept apart, and be treated of in a place by themselves” (*TS* 1.21: 48). This assignment of distinctive status to the feminine body is considered the birth of modern sex (Harvey, “The Century” 901). Yet, sociological studies explain how it primarily translated into a reinforcing of unequal distribution of power and of restraining gender norms, as the scope of desirable sexual conduct increasingly narrowed to a phallogentric, procreative paradigm (Tosh, qtd. in Harvey 906). However, significant change occurs not in a clear-cut point of disruption: sexual practice, as a cultural product, is strenuously prone to disagreement between academic writing and synchronic social practices.¹⁷ It appears urgent to recall that “culture is not a monolith”, as it is uncertain to what extent did Laqueur's dichotomies permeate everyday interaction (Harvey, “The Century” 913-5).

Sterne did not take this renewed range of possibilities lightly. Indeed, Harvey's article is keen on weighing distinct narratives regarding bodily interpretation: by deeming diachronic assessment inadequate, it demonstrates a legitimate logomachy where normative investigation and oral erotic culture toiled for psychological

presence. Hence, it can be argued that *TS* mirrors the ambiguous nature of this debate, as this paper will attempt to demonstrate by a particular set of characters and events. A chemist of foregone eras and modern theories, Sterne combines four valuable test-subjects: Walter, his *MAN OF SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY*; Elizabeth, the alienated, *poco-curante* spouse; Toby, obviously building castles in the sky; lastly, as *militat omnis amans*, Widow Wadman.

Standing before the aforementioned historical environment, it would seem groundless to evade the rendering of the wrongful “daughter[s] of Eve” (*TS* 8.8: 348). In other words, bawdy, gender-specific humour is, as previously displayed by a brief overview of striking critical pieces, one of the most discussed traits of *TS*’s “comedy of errors”.¹⁸ Nonetheless, though facing a plethora of *COVER’D-WAY-IN* jests (2.6: 66), readers are still seized by an uncanny sense of obscurity regarding the concrete woman. An atmosphere of hazy mistrust envelops the local midwife: the ineptitude of “her own efforts” is heavily implied, as the “happy fortune” of “dame nature” (1.7: 10) arises as a valid solution for two decades of successful births: as explained in 1.18, there is not “one slip or accident which could fairly be laid to her account” (1.18: 33; emphasis added). Further denial of corporeal self-awareness is revealed in Walter Shandy’s rantings in Volume 1: Tristram’s more benevolent justifications of “wind or water . . . the mere swell of imagination and fancy” (30) spiral into accusations of “vile trick and imposition” (31).

A play of many plots is thereby enacted in this clouded feminine frame. Elizabeth seemingly embodies McLaren’s picture of “the passive Victorian lying back and thinking of the empire” (qtd. in Harvey 903) - or, in a curious twist of events, thinking of the household deity of a winding clock. Following Harvey and Merchant’s modelling of the eighteenth-century middle- and upper-class woman, Elizabeth’s body is enclosed in the private sphere,¹⁹ rendered chaste, dispassionate, asexual in male recollection:

A temperate current of blood ran orderly through her veins in all months of the year, and in all critical moments both of the day and night alike; nor did she superinduce the least heat into her humours from the manual effervescencies of devotional tracts . . . And as for my father’s example! . . . ‘twas the whole business of his life to keep all fancies of that kind out of her head - Nature had done her part, to have spared him this trouble; and what was not a little inconsistent, my father knew it (*TS* 9.1: 381)

However, the clock soon strikes on the stage of perceptions; a change of costumes is due. In Walter Shandy's stage of perceptions, the phantasms of the loving, domestic spirit and that of the capricious Eve seem inextricable. From maternal nursing, the "inescapable biology" (Hitchcock, qtd. in Harvey 905), the child inherits "prejudice of education . . . *the devil*" (TS 5.16: 240). Beyond the maternal processes of nurturing, Walter, the "late but defiantly antifeminist reader of the Genesis story" (Loscocco, "Can't Live Without 'Em" 166), seems most terrified of psychological influence, one he can never properly systematise. Though the physical efforts of labour may dislodge the fine web of sapience, it is harmful fancy that shapes ruthless emperors.²⁰ Unfortunately for the stiff, self-denying natural philosopher, his idealised one-seed method for the begetting of a capable copy-child is yet a distant dream.

Walter Shandy is indeed emblematic in his extensive intellectual idiosyncrasies. From dissertations on NOSES to disastrous attachment to first-name influence, Walter aims to rectify even the slightest gestures of his son's future governor (TS 6.5: 265), emphasising his preferences of machinery over organic matter. However, Walter still exhibits signs of dwelling in interactive sexual standards. In his "letter of instructions" to Toby in 8.34, he fosters the persuasive nature of whispering, as "[s]ilence, and whatever approaches it, weaves dreams of midnight secrecy into the brain" (377). Moreover, he betrays performative anxiety, recognising that, though his pleasure increases "not a jot" (2.12: 75), it is desirable "to shew himself a man of prowess", "no matter whether he loves the service or no" (8.34: 375). At the same time, humorous recognition of a shaved head for concealing the inexorable passage of time also uncovers wary sensitivity towards heteronormative expectations:²¹

Shave the whole top of thy crown clean, once at least every four or five days, but oftner if convenient; lest in taking off thy wig before her, thro' absence of mind, she should be able to discover how much has been cut away by Time - how much by Trim. - 'Twere better to keep ideas of baldness out of her fancy. (376-7)

A third agent intervenes in the reconfiguration of sexuality; in a stroke of irony, one that is famed specifically for not acting. Unlike his brother, Uncle Toby allows enchantment to rewire every fibre within him. As Widow Wadman casts her spell, he is as submissive "as a lamb", sitting "still and let[ting] the poison work in his veins without resistance" (8.26: 369). With his compassionate demeanour and his mirthful naiveté, Uncle Toby embodies a spiritual counterpart of Walter, a militarised utopia where the fiends of "art and circumvention of woman" (8.34: 375) dissolve in blissful oblivion of the Other.²²

These options of representation, allied to the continual cloaking of events behind aposiopes***, have catalysed significant discussion on many possible anti-feminist readings of the novel. Though not dismissing the soundness of such interpretations, I find it necessary to recognise Loscocco's pertinent portrayal of a titanic conflict in the field towards accountability,²³ as it can be argued that "the novel implicitly defines his antifeminist ways as erroneous" (*ibidem* 168). If one considers the implications of gender-focused reception, it is indeed curious to see Sterne's account of "squeamish" women guided as frightened Dantes through an *Inferno* of whiskers, an ironic account of perceived prudery amongst critics.²⁴ In fact, the inversion of the characters' own inclinations is realised by placing the lens on sexually charged evidences, to which Slawkenbergius's tale stands as an important occurrence. Whole sisterhoods are possessed by projected chimeras of larger-than-life NOSES as they scratch, tumble and toss in their blankets for hours on end (TS 4.SLAWKENBERGIUS'S TALE: 163). Thus, visions of the "earthy" medieval body are liberated into the enclosed space of chasteness, where ladies count their "beads with both hands, unsuspected under [their] farthingale" (5.1: 222), and the erotic significance of tousled locks heightens proximity and evokes "the simplicity which poets sing of in better days" (7.PLAIN STORIES).

Furthermore, it would seem undeniable to concede that a great part of this dialogue is performed outside the boundaries of verbal language. Such transgression is native to the novel's macrostructural games. If the novel wanders beyond its original premise, how could one blame its characters for engaging in reverie and misunderstanding? As Brady reasonably describes, sex and sensibility in Sterne are entwined threads streaming from a common mead: equivocation. As a result, writhing as if embraced by too tight a pair of breeches, characters endeavour to surpass verbal fallibility and find closure beyond the "hundred little delicacies that st[and] in the way" (*A Sentimental Journey* 27).

What forms of expression constitute these attempts? Firstly, it seems imperative to grant touch its authority of persuasion, as *A Sentimental Journey's*²⁵ Yorick and his fleeting *dame* would vehemently subscribe. Accidentally determined hand-holding is prolonged to tender yearning; yet, words blaze and boil bonded by custom and "good breeding", and a self-recognised defeat closes the most eager of lips:

She had scarce got twenty paces distant from me, ere something within me called out for a more particular enquiry; - it brought on the idea of a further separation: - I

might possibly never see her more: - The heart is for saving what it can I wished to know her name, - her family's - her condition; and as I knew the place to which she was going, I wanted to know from whence she came: but there was no coming at all this intelligence; a hundred little delicacies stood in the way. I form'd a score different plans. - There was no such thing as a man's asking her directly; - the thing was impossible. (ASJ 27)

When all speech is barren, Sterne composes the poetics of silence: *in their most frail gesture are things which enclose them*.²⁶ However, as Widow Wadman's LOVE-MILITANCY proves, unsuspecting hearts are often set aflame "at both ends at once" (TS 8.16: 353). When close combat in the sentry-box seems scant, gaze is the heavy artillery of choice, for it truly "has the quickest commerce with the soul . . . and leaves something more inexpressible upon the fancy, than words can either convey" (5.9: 272) - then, a digressive mind inclined to endearment recalls yet again cummings's imagery: Toby's denuded innocence does "not know what it is about [Wadman] that closes / and opens; only something in [him] understands / the voice of [her] eyes is deeper than all roses".²⁷ As Tristram acknowledges, "[i]t was an eye - But I shall be in love with it myself, if I say another word about it" (8.25: 368): it was precisely the ardent gentleness of its silent whispers that "did [his] uncle Toby's business" (*ibidem*). In other words, Widow Wadman fulfils her conquest in a scene that truly walks the line separating humour, erotic endeavour and the embodiment of sentimental conflicts. As a result, it would seem constraining to dismiss the sensible in body Sexual or the physical in body Sentiment.

The present association does not intend to affirm that all physicalities displayed are immanently sentimental. Key-scenes such as Tristram's conception and circumcision compose a comedy by contradiction: attainable *tableaux* arise from a common bedrock of narrative experimentalism that transcends its immediate symbols. Edmund Burke, albeit reproachful of "tiresome" digressions, is indisputable when referring to "a perpetual series of disappointments" (qtd. in Howes 106). Yet, these comical reversals, often performed in the novel through the medium of language, are fundamental to the development of emotional and physical allegories. As Allen describes, TS proposes a principle of intimate connection between an ideal, stable univocity of symbols and sexual potential ("Sexuality/Textuality in *Tristram Shandy*" 655). Unfortunately, "[t]he major difficulty presented by language is that it is not a stable form of signification" (*ibidem*). As such, the recurrent motif of sexual inexperience and impotency mirrors, in a sense, the novel's defeat at achieving its own title's commitment. To a certain extent, it is also worth considering how

Laqueur's theory of "violent pleasure" as *conditio sine qua non* of "successful generation" (qtd. in Harvey 903) thoroughly dismisses Walter's farcical paroxysms and hopes of reproductive self-sufficiency beyond "his scapegoat of choice, woman's body" (Loscocco, "Can't Live Without 'Em" 176). Thus it seems perfectly possible to assume the presence of a metafictional trick according to which Elizabeth's iconic observation is not the only encumbrance in the act of conception. If, on the one hand, Elizabeth's absent-mindedness betrays sincere disappointment,²⁸ Walter's "perfect maleness" (Loscocco, "Can't Live Without 'Em" 169), on the other hand, cannot manage anything beyond hollow silence:²⁹ how could Tristram ever thrive? Thus, disruption of pattern is sovereignty in a novel where formal chaos is the metric for expectation and denial. Brady stresses "arrest of affect", where sex and sentiment coexist in permanent inhibition:

Many critics have remarked on what might be called "arrest of affect" in the novel, the way in which the sentimental and the sexual inhibit each other. Arrest of affect permits Sterne to undermine the reader's settled patterns without unduly disturbing him. (Brady 54)

These perpetual assertions of promise and denial, disquiet and repression followed by unsatisfactory delegation of meaning, contribute to the riddle of Shklovsky's "erotic estrangement"; readers are left in a myriad of literary purgatories where an elucidation on "button-holes" will never come (*TS* 5.8: 233). Cloaked in euphemism, they are root for convolution within the mechanics of the narrative, continuously dimming and delaying events:

He [Toby] is being wooed by a widow, who would very much like to know whether or not he had in fact been castrated by that wound. Yet, at this time she cannot bring herself to ask the fateful question . . . [misunderstanding] is introduced into the text as a device for the purpose of impeding the Toby-widow romance. (Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* 163-4)

Nonetheless, despite the necessary equivocation, some communicative compromise is accepted by all parties involved: touching, beckoning, gesturing, the bare flourishing of a sword slashing through the air are structures of "proper speech" (*ibidem* 167). This is crucial to all levels of narration: in *THE INTRICANCIES OF DIEGO AND JULIA* (*TS* 4.1), a meticulous progression of gestures contributes to the furthering of two reunited journeys. Emerging towards the core plot, Trim's body language with Mrs Bridget in 9.28 serves as a restorative agent in Toby's public image:

. . . and in this cursed trench, Mrs Bridget, quoth the Corporal, taking her by the hand, did [Toby] receive his wound which crush'd him so miserably *here* - In pronouncing which he slightly press'd the back of her hand towards the part he felt for - and let it fall.

We thought, Mr. Trim, it had been more in the middle - said Mrs. Bridget -

That would have undone us for ever - said the Corporal.

- And left my poor mistress undone too - said Bridget.” (406)

Finally, boundless metalepsis leads us to Tristram-as-narrator, waving his forefinger at an undetermined point of his “vessel of the human frame”, knowing all too well we cannot “help ourselves” (8.4: 345-6) from pantomiming all doubt away.

This analysis has explored how euphemistic literary figurations, in varying degrees of transparency, have striven to depict the body as an agent of pleasure. Yet, as the sensible element complexifies the experience, it seems impossible to overlook its authority. When physical eruption is unfeasible, the inner workings of lust in the mind-to-mind dialogue are, in fact, approached to a considerable extent, thus expanding the vocal scope for the female perspective. For instance, Widow Wadman’s extensive inner world of expectation is crucial to the development of Uncle Toby’s *amours*, the erecting of dreams intrinsically tied to self-perception, as “a woman has a power, physically speaking, of viewing a man in more lights than one - but here, for her soul, she can see him in no light without mixing something of her own goods and chattels along with him” (8.8: 348).

As such, in nearly eleven years of armistice (8.10: 350), Wadman has little to grasp and nurse beyond her archetypal haven,³⁰ formed with “the best and kindest of clay”, tempered “with her own milk” (9.22: 398). Such exercise of idealising does not, however, efface tender remembrance of past intimate connections: in the second night of Toby’s brief stay, “she took out her marriage-settlement, and read it over **with great devotion**” (8.9: 349; emphasis added). This experience of recollection enables closure for former tangles of yearning, a final step towards the determinant kick of the pin in the third night.³¹

By considering the centrality of daydreaming in the feminine sexual behaviour of the novel, it is equally pressing to mention how the Sternean male psyche is far from exempt of idealising. No gardener nor gladiator is exempt from the control of FANCY, “musing upon the bank . . . [turning] straws and bulrushes into masts and bowsprits” (TS 8.5: 346). In addition, *ASJ*’s Yorick shows how enchantment, “the root of the root and the bud of the bud”³² of attraction, can be mordaciously pictured as a fanciful Eros:

I had not yet seen her face - t'was not material . . . *Fancy* had finished the whole head and pleased herself as much with its fitting her goddess . . . - but thou art a seduced, and a seducing slut; and albeit thou cheatest us seven times a day with thy pictures and images, yet with so many charms dost thou do it, and thou deckest out thy pictures in the shapes of so many angels of light, 'tis a shame to break with thee. (ASJ 19)

It is natural to visualise how Yorick's admiration mirrors Uncle Toby's impression of Wadman's considerate kindness (TS 9.32: 408-9): one can scarcely believe how he has managed not to explode into a cacophony of *Lillabuleros* after such great disillusion.

Thus, it seems relevant to clarify that, though halted bewitchment runs the play, characters are not necessarily lost in a mire of semantic confusion. Corporal Trim is keen to acknowledge his tender inclinations towards the young Beguine:

. . . - she wish'd me rest, and promised to be with me early in the morning. - She wish'd me, and please your honour, what was not to be had. My fever ran very high that night - her figure made sad disturbance within me - I was every moment cutting the world in two—to give her half of it - and every moment was I crying, That I had nothing . . . to share with her . . . my heart sickened, and I lost colour when she left the room . . . (TS 8.20: 364-5)

Corporal Trim promptly “clarifies” - if one is allowed to use such a term on enigmas and periphrases, the ruling planets of the novel's linguistic cosmology - that said disposition is initially a product of lust, rather than “love” (*ibidem*). Moreover, Uncle Toby's solution of (very periphrastic) “passion . . . to the highest pitch” (8.22: 366) may likely cause a comical reaction; however, this warm memory, tinted with awareness of “sad disturbance within” the electrified body, enhances the proximity of the sentimental and the erotic, as lust and longing overlap in remembrance. As 8.22 endorses, this synergy “contain[s] in it the essence of all the love-romances which ever have been wrote” (*ibidem*).

In conclusion, this analysis of attainable literature has striven to emphasize a perspective on *TS* increasingly embraced by scholars: as Friedrich Nietzsche eloquently expressed, Laurence Sterne “knew what lies between sublimity and rascality” (TS 453*). Physical responsiveness and emotional awareness meet in a unique “carnal and spiritual hermaphroditism” (*ibidem*), where language as a medium is simultaneously device and motif. In this inexhaustible novel, profoundly conscious of the academic discussions and the necessarily multifarious social practices of its era, “uncrystallised

flesh and blood” render “the soul stark naked” with a subtlety and conscience of raw humanity that paint Nietzsche’s “freest writer”.

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² "It has sometimes been made a wonder that things so discordant should go together - that men of humour are often likewise men of sensibility. But the wonder should rather be to see them divided." (qtd. in Howes 379)

³ Henceforth referred to by its initials as follows: *TS*.

⁴ As proposed by Harold Bloom in his *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973).

⁵ "That faculty of irony . . . which often passes by the name of humour, but consists chiefly in a certain superficial distortion or reversal of objects, and ends at best in laughter." (qtd. in Howes 379)

⁶ "Nothing odd will do long. 'Tristram Shandy' did not last." (Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* 733)

⁷ All in-text references with this configuration of asterisks indicate additional critical reviews, biographical evidence and essays included in Hawley's Norton Critical Edition of *TS*. Such is the case of Parnell's and Hawley's articles, the critical review of Griffith and the epitaph to Mrs. James quoted in Parnell. These individual occurrences are mentioned in separate references in the "Works Cited" section.

⁸ "[W]e have hitherto had occasion to lament that, while the author was exerting his talents to maintain the humour and consistency of his characters, he himself was so much out of character, and we could wish sincerely that we had now no farther reason for complains of that kind." (qtd. in Howes 141)

⁹ "In a context of praise of Sterne's digressive style: "In an age when other grand writers were squaring their periods by rule and compass, he flings forth his jocund sentences loose and at random; . . . yet how they shine where they soar, and how lightly rebound when they fall!" (qtd. in Howes 28)

¹⁰ "The larger relationships among sentiment, sensibility, and sexuality in *Tristram* are not so easy to define." (Brady 51)

¹¹ "[H]owever, the role of sentimentality usually comes second when discussing the literary movements of the century." (Singh, "The Sentimentality of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*")

¹² Regarding *pathos* and the fantastic phantasmagoria of an "invisible cock", an anonymous article from *Critical Review* 19 comments: "[v]ideri vult et est" [He wants to be seen and is.] (qtd in Howes 160).

¹³ "I am scribbling away at **my Tristram** . . . I shall write as long as I live, 'tis, in fact, **my hobby-horse** . . . so much am I **delighted** with my uncle Toby's imaginary character, that I am become an **enthusiast**." (qtd. in Howes 135; all emphasis added). This aura of fond commitment to his task is further heightened by allusions to Sterne's daughter Lydia, as well as his wife, who knitted while listening to the novel's coming-to-life. As Hawley notes in her 2019 Norton Critical Edition, the addressee of such words is yet to be accurately identified, though Howes admits the possibility of Lady Anna Dacre's presence.

¹⁴ "The sweet companion, and the friend sincere, / Need no mechanic help to force the tear." (*TS* 491*)

¹⁵ "[M]edicine does not form an objective background in *Tristram Shandy*; rather, it is worked into his fiction and intricately connected with his literary techniques . . . new anatomies . . . exploited by novelists to describe and account for the feelings of their characters." (*ibidem*)

¹⁶ "Prior to the eighteenth century, men and women were placed on a vertical, hierarchical axis, in which their bodies were seen as two comparable variants of one kind. Underpinning this 'one-sex model' was the humoral system . . . The way in which this became clearest was in the structural equivalence of

male and female genitals: 'the vagina is imagined as an interior penis, the labia as foreskin, the uterus as scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles.' (*ibidem*)

¹⁷ "[I]t is worth pausing to ask whether sexual polarization was anything more than a discursive trope. Did it reflect the reality of relations between men and women?" (Tosh, qtd. in Harvey 915)

¹⁸ On this particular problematic, Paula Loscocco comments on feminist readings of the novel, which tend to attribute Shandean sex-specific humour as necessarily "misogynistic" ("Can't Live Without 'Em: Walter Shandy and the Woman Within" 167). Nonetheless, as the author comes to develop by invoking Leigh Ehler's ideas, this choice can be viewed as the creation of a corrective "satiric norm" (*ibidem*).

¹⁹ "Carolyn Merchant tied changing perceptions of Nature during the scientific revolution to the reassertion of women's passive role in reproduction, the concomitant repression of 'sexual passion', and the increasingly powerful association of middle- and upper-class women with domesticity." (Harvey, "The Century" 903)

²⁰ "You see 'tis high time, said my father . . . to take this creature out of these women's hands, and put him into those of a private governor. Marcus Antoninus provided fourteen governors all at once to superintend his son Commodus's education . . . I know very well . . . that Commodus's mother was in love with a gladiator at the time of her conception, which accounts for a great many of Commodus's cruelties when he became emperor." (*TS* 6.5: 265)

²¹ The time-wary sketch of Janatone's beauty reveals how this perception is transversal in gender: ". . . but he who measures thee, Janatone, must do it now—thou carriest the principles of change within thy frame; and considering the chances of a transitory life, I would not answer for thee a moment" (*TS* 7.9: 312).

²² Following this reasoning, it is curious to compare both characters' reactions in the end of chapter 4.12.

²³ "I am not denying that *Tristram Shandy* compels this kind of literal, sex-differentiating reading. But I am asserting that failure to examine this compulsion has caused critical discussion to remain unselfconsciously within the novel's antifeminist paradigm of a woman-provoked Fall of man, trying to decide whom to blame for the misogynistic portrayal of women." (Loscocco, "Can't Live Without 'Em" 167)

²⁴ See Sterne's letter to an anonymous physician in Howes, *Critical Heritage* 48-51.

²⁵ Henceforward named after its initials as follows: *ASJ*.

²⁶ cummings' undying poem encapsulates Yorick's running thoughts while holding the lady's hand: "The pulsations of the arteries along my fingers pressing across hers told her what was passing within me: she looked down—a silence of some moments followed" (*ASJ* 22).

²⁷ From "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond" (cummings, *Complete Poems* 367).

²⁸ Such readings inevitably place an onus on a necessarily unreliable narrator: "Leave we my mother - (truest of all the Poco-curantes of her sex!) . . . that is, - indifferent whether it was done this way or that,—provided it was but done at all" (*TS* 6.20: 282). Is Elizabeth truly "indifferent", if the thought of a winding clock is immediately succeeded by "the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popp[ing] into her head"? (1.4: 8)

²⁹ "Walter's ideas about proper procreation, however, feature an even more telling prescription: it should be done in silence Walter's ideal of procreation is refraining from action. Elizabeth's question in l.1. . . . interrupts the process and causes Walter to 'scatter . . . and disperse . . . the animal spirits.' But if Walter perceives 'scattering' as an accident, then arguably his idea of safe conduct involves maintained concentration, continued retention." (Loscocco, "Can't Live Without 'Em" 172)

³⁰ See Slawkenbergius's Tale in Volume IV: "The less they understood of the matter, the greater was their wonder about it—they were left in all the distresses of desire unsatisfied" (169).

³¹ "- With a kick of both heels at once, but at the same time the most natural kick that could be kick'd in her situation - . . . she kick'd the pin out of [Bridget's] fingers - the etiquette which hung upon it, down - down it fell to the ground, and was shivered into a thousand atoms." (*ibidem*)

³² From cummings's "i carry your heart with me(i carry it in)" (*Completed Poems* 766).