

Locke, Hume, and Hobby-Horses in *Tristram Shandy*

ARNOLD E. DAVIDSON, *Elmhurst College*

John Locke, of course, is the philosopher most often referred to in *Tristram Shandy*. But even though Sterne's protagonist-narrator purports to fall back on Locke's theory of the "association of ideas" for justification for his unusual narrative method, this character can hardly be seen as one whose mental processes illustrate his posited epistemology.¹ If anything, Tristram Shandy, gentleman and narrator, inverts the essential theory of the philosopher whose name he regularly invokes. He also does so in a manner suggested by that philosopher himself, for Locke, it should here be noted, had two theories of association. The first and more important—basic to his whole system—hypothesized that through a systematic process of cogitation, simple ideas were united in the mind in order to derive more complex conclusions. Later, however, as an afterthought to the fourth edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke admitted the possibility of a second type of association. Almost apologetically (perhaps realizing its implications could shake the rational foundation of his thought), he pointed out that the mind could also make random spontaneous connections. That second variety of association was, for Locke, a flaw of the mind; it hindered more "normal" processes of reason.² For Sterne, however, only the second process is normal, and nowhere does *Tristram Shandy* evince the orderly mental procedures that Locke advocated. Tristram's thought, as evidenced by his narration, is, instead, all unordered and unconscious association. Indeed, in the novel itself, Sterne's narrator insists that no theoretical system can encompass human nature: "—Inconsistent soul that man is!—languishing under wounds which he has the power to heal!—*his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge!*—his reason, that precious gift of God to him— . . ."³ The orderly processes of thought posited by a philosopher such as Locke, and believed in by a rationalist like Walter Shandy, are simply a cover for the much more chaotic forces always lurking beneath the surface of only seemingly dispassionate reflection.⁴

Another eighteenth-century philosopher, also considering Locke's two varieties of association, reaches this same Shandean conclusion. David Hume is

¹For an excellent discussion of the theory that Sterne relied substantially on Locke, see Ernest Tuveson, "Locke and Sterne," in *Reason and the Imagination, Studies in the History of Ideas, 1600-1800*, ed. J. A. Mazzeo (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 255-77. For dissenting views, see Arthur H. Cash, "The Lockean Psychology of *Tristram Shandy*," *ELH*, 22 (1955), 123-35; or John L. Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1954).

²Cash, p. 126.

³Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James A. Work (New York: Odyssey, 1940), p. 203 (emphasis added). Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

⁴"Systematic" thought is thus systematic self-deception. As Tristram early points out, his father, "like all systematick reasoners," would "twist and torture every thing in nature to support his hypothesis" (p. 53) and consequently he would always be "baffled and overthrown in all his little systems" by "events perpetually falling out against him, and in so critical and cruel a way, as if they had purposely been plann'd and pointed against him, merely to insult his speculations" (pp. 55-56).

not obviously referred to in *Tristram Shandy*, but his thought, more than Locke's, pervades the novel.⁵ Unlike Locke, Hume felt that men associated ideas not according to any rational process but merely by habit. That theory of nonrational association is implicit in all of *Tristram Shandy* and is also, in several passages, explicitly argued. For example, after describing a brief philosophical disquisition on Locke's idea of the *medius terminus* as the "great and principal act of ratiocination in man" (p. 237), Tristram illustrates how ratiocination actually functions. Thought, like action, is pulled along not by syllogisms but by particular Hobby-Horses. Those Hobby-Horses do not result from rational associations. Instead, they promote mechanical responses. Only a true believer in Locke—or Locke himself—could find in Walter's and Toby's discourse a meaningful exchange of ideas conducted according to Lockean principles: "Had the same great reasoner [Locke] looked on . . . he would have concluded my uncle Toby had got hold of the *medius terminus*!" (p. 238). He would also have been mistaken: ". . . with all the semblance of a deep school-man intent upon the *medius terminus*,—my uncle Toby was in fact as ignorant of the whole lecture, and all its pro's and con's, as if my father had been translating *Hafen Slawkenbergius* from the *Latin* tongue to the *Cherokee*. But the word *siege*, like a talismanic power, in my father's metaphor, wafting back my uncle Toby's fancy, quick as a note could follow the touch,—he opened his ears . . ." (pp. 238-39). Toby's immediate response to any term that can remotely be construed as military is habitual, even mechanical, just as are Walter's responses to any idea related to philosophy or Tristram Shandy's responses to the facts of his biography, which are—facts and responses—the essence of Sterne's plot. Free will is out of the question. Conditioning—starting even with the manner of one's conception—to tally dominates.

This conclusion that man's mental processes are habitual, not rational, could easily result in a profound skepticism and, in the history of ideas, did lead to neopyrrhonism. Yet a pessimistic fatalism is not argued in *Tristram Shandy*. Again one of Hume's ideas applies: "If I must be a fool, as all of those who reason or believe anything certainly are," Hume observed, "my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable."⁶ Everyone in *Tristram Shandy* lives by that generous dictate. Whether it be Uncle Toby's devotion to military history or Mrs. Shandy's practice of obsessive agreement, they all cherish foolish interests and habits. In short, they wisely accept their folly, accommodate themselves to it, and nurture it "naturally and agreeably" instead of attempting to change themselves or their concerns. Such preoccupation with a Hobby-Horse provides a diversion from the more painful aspects of life and particularly from the possibility that one's life might be little more than a mechanized, meaningless duration. As Hume noted: "Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy to Pyrrhonism. For this reason I rely entirely upon them."⁷

"Carelessness and inattention" pervade Sterne's narrative method. From the very beginning of the book when Tristram carelessly overlooks the fact that only eight months separate the time of his supposed conception from the day of his birth to the final sections in which the reader's attention is still directed away from an otherwise pervasive maiming, sickness, and death, the novel relies on Hume's two unlikely graces in order to avoid the bleak philosophy against which

⁵Perhaps recognizing an affinity, Hume, as Traugott (p. 74) notes, especially admired *Tristram Shandy*.

⁶T. V. Smith and Marjorie Green, eds., *Berkeley, Hume, and Kant* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 226.

⁷Quoted in Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Volume V* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), p. 118.

Hume warned. But Sterne, as author, and Tristram, as character, are not simply indifferent to the myriad catastrophes that can befall man. The book is filled with the common tragedies of common life. Nevertheless, the protagonist-narrator diligently cultivates the attentive forgetfulness which allows him to digress, for example, from the terrifying image of Corporal Trim at his master's funeral "laying his [Toby's] sword and scabbard with a trembling hand across his coffin" and leading his "mourning horse" (p. 452). He can replace that picture with the picture of another Trim puffing merrily away at his new Turkish tobacco-pipes and waiting for Toby to join him in the mock siege. Such slips in consciousness alone can counter sorrow. No rationalization makes death less real. As the previously quoted passage continues, even "my father's systems," Tristram observes, "shall be baffled by his sorrows; and, in spite of his philosophy, I shall behold him, as he inspects the lackered plate, twice taking his spectacles from off his nose, to wipe away the dew which nature has shed upon them—" (p. 452).

"Carelessness and inattention" constitute, in a sense, the narrative method of *Tristram Shandy*. Reminiscent of Descartes who earlier cultivated a "methodological doubt" in order to derive certain conclusions, Sterne employs a "methodological chaos" to structure his plot. Tristram begins by proposing to write an autobiography and yet, as D. W. Jefferson observes, the novel ends before the hero is mature enough to become what in literature is generally recognized as a character.⁸ The book is an early *Bildungsroman*, but one in which little *Bildung* takes place. Furthermore, the life which is ostensibly the focus of the work is overshadowed by a gallery of eccentric relatives and associates. We see very little of the actions of the hero. Yet, from the process of narration and the details selected by the narrator, there finally emerges what is indeed an autobiography. It is not an official "life" of "Tristram Shandy, Gentleman" but a random sampling of the opinions and habits of "Tristram Shandy, Author." Nevertheless, considering the philosophical assumptions underlying the novel, which are suggested even in the epigraph from Epictetus ("Not the deeds but the telling of deeds is what concerns man"), only this variety of autobiography can do justice to its subject. The seemingly chaotic presentation is perfectly adapted to the purposes of this book, one of which is to show the disorderly fashion in which men really think.

Chaotic presentation serves other purposes too. One might notice that Sterne creates his idiosyncratic comic world out of materials that are often far from comic. The disappointments, frustrations, and defeats of Tristram, Walter, or even Uncle Toby, differently perceived, could provide passion enough to spin a thoroughly tragic plot. Similarly, what for Sterne is simply another character's Hobby-Horse could easily be metamorphosed by another author into the dark obsessions of a twisted mind. But *Tristram Shandy* is peopled by eccentrics who all have their own strange obsessions. Equally important, the reader's attention is also dispersed because of Tristram's disconnected thought and wandering narration. Instead of a microscopic study of a few tormented minds (a Clarissa or a Lovelace, for example), we have a panoramic survey of a whole world of Shandean. The result is the artistic distancing that comedy requires. However, just as Sterne's disconnected method allows for comedy by de-emphasizing the misfortunes of any one individual, his method and matter paradoxically forestall the social evaluation that comedy usually entails. No characters can particularly depart from accepted norms in a world where all, including the narrator who shapes the vision of the novel, have their different peccadilloes.

⁸D. W. Jefferson, "Tristram Shandy and the Tradition of Learned Wit," *ELC*, 1 (1951), 239.

As a major historian of the novel has observed, in any other work of fiction Toby and Walter would themselves be satirical figures.⁹ But Sterne, on the social level, the moral, and the philosophic, does not distinguish between ought and is. Men simply are in a world that is. Happily, their basic nature is to be kind. Sterne's characters are not even egotists. Limited but specific interests prevent them from being narcissistically absorbed in their sorrows—and their own selves. His Hobby-Horse will carry a man through most of the tragedies that must befall him in a life that is not tragic precisely because most tragedies should be survived. Thus Walter's grief over his eldest son's death is soon displaced by his habitual preoccupation with philosophy and his disposition to orate. A Hobby-Horse allows a man to forget himself, his limitations, and his failures. Doubts and misgivings which well might plague the mind of any rational creature, even those anxieties which should result from major tragi-comic shortcomings such as Uncle Toby's wound, are replaced by usually harmless fixations.

The life of the protagonist clearly attests to the advantages of not directly confronting the bare facts of one's life. By themselves, those facts are appalling: "On the fifth day of *November*, 1718 . . . was I *Tristram Shandy*, Gentleman, brought forth into this scurvy and disastrous world of ours . . . [Since then] I have been the continual sport of what the world calls fortune . . . in every stage of my life, and at every turn and corner where she could get fairly at me, the ungracious Duchess has pelted me with a set of as pitiful misadventures and cross accidents as ever small Hero sustained" (pp. 9-10). Nevertheless, by the last books of the novel, the noseless, misnamed, strangely conceived, poorly educated, and perhaps sexually maimed Tristram can view even his life as a farce, as a comic play to be enjoyed. Precipitating this change from dejection to optimistic acceptance is the narrator's increasing identification with his novel. He has found in it his Hobby-Horse. By the Sixth Volume, Tristram is "now beginning to get fairly into my work" (p. 473). That work allows him to circumvent catastrophes both past and future: ". . . the book shall make its way in the world, much better than its master has done before it—Oh *Tristram! Tristram!* can this but be once brought about—the credit, which will attend thee as an author, shall counterbalance the many evils which have befallen thee as a man—thou wilt feast upon the one—when thou hast lost all sense and remembrance of the other!" (p. 337). By the end of *Tristram Shandy* the narrator and the novel are so intertwined, his life and his opinions are so inextricably bound, that the success of the story does indeed "counterbalance" the failures of the life. The "tragedies" which befell Tristram in the first volumes have been displaced by the novel. That novel is the narrator's Hobby-Horse and allows him in an otherwise bleak world to ride "peaceably and quietly along the King's highway" (p. 13).¹⁰

The narrator's identification with his narration suggests still another reason for his rambling method. If Tristram exists through *Tristram Shandy*, then the conclusion of the book means the end of the man. Thus the many digressions and procrastinations. We do not have a narrator regularly sidetracked from his story line; we have an author in search of a way not to end. So here again a Hobby-Horse can come to its wise owner's rescue. For Tristram, every present action, including the act of writing, conjures up memories of past causes, conditions, or contingent associations, which in chain-reaction fashion, carry the

⁹Ernest A. Baker, *The History of the English Novel, Volume IV* (1930; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1950), p. 257.

¹⁰Essentially the same idea is advanced in a somewhat different context by Joan J. Hall, "The Hobbyhorses World of 'Tristram Shandy,'" *MLQ*, 24 (1963), 131-43.

same process still further. The result, an artful explosion backwards in time, is precisely what the narrator requires. Telling his own story, he falls further and further behind what we might term the narrative present. There is, in fact, little present time in *Tristram Shandy*. Randomly repossessing the past helps alleviate the problems of the present and turns one away from the still darker uncertainties of the future, one of which probably is—considering Tristram's unmarried state and his maimed condition—the extinction of the family. But this fate too can be largely circumvented by a Hobby-Horse. The adult Tristram's escape is through his novel and into a past filled with Shandys and Shandean.

That escape is so successful that perhaps *Tristram Shandy* does not really end. Much critical controversy has focused on whether or not the novel *was* completed.¹¹ But I would argue that the book should conclude with a non-conclusion. Indeed, in Tristram's tale of his father's very human bull—a bull that went about his business imperfectly but with a grave face, a story not understood by the mother and misheard by Yorick—Sterne achieves a most subtle open ending: "L—d! said my mother, what is all this story about?— A COCK and a BULL, said *Yorick*—And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard" (p. 647).¹² Life continues, and fails to continue, in a thoroughly disorganized and therefore completely human fashion. And thus the need for a Hume-like acceptance of the foibles of humanity and the cultivation of one's own eccentricities in a world devoid of centers. In short, one requires a Hobby-Horse to help one wander as pleasantly as possible through a life that cannot progress, Sterne insists, in an orderly, Lockean fashion to a clear and definite end.

¹¹Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 231, reviews the criticism on the subject.

¹²For a fuller assessment of the ending, see A. R. Towers, "Sterne's Cock and Bull Story," *ELH*, 24 (1957), 12-29.