

# Tristram Shandy and the Comedy of Context

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*La Fosseuse's* voice was naturally soft and low, yet 'twas an articulate voice: and every letter of the word *whiskers* fell distinctly upon the Queen of Navarre's ear—*Whiskers!* cried the queen, laying a greater stress upon the word, and as if she had still distrusted her ears—*Whiskers;* replied *La Fosseuse*, repeating the word a third time—There is not a cavalier, madam, of his age in *Navarre*, continued the maid of honour, pressing the page's interest upon the queen, that has so gallant a pair—Of what? cried *Margaret*, smiling—Of whiskers, said *La Fosseuse*, with infinite modesty. . . . 'Twas plain to the whole court the word was ruined: *La Fosseuse* had given it a wound, and it was not the better for passing through all these defiles— . . . the word in course became indecent, and (after a few efforts) absolutely unfit for use. The best word in the best language of the best world, must have suffered under such combinations.<sup>1</sup>

*La Fosseuse* endows the word with other than usual meanings by changing the context in which it appears until most unusual associations accrue to the tarnished innocence of whiskers. What *La Fosseuse* has done, though wittily of course, is to redefine whiskers in a way which is an implicit criticism of Locke's view of language. First of all, the passage is a commentary on Locke's assertion that "He that applies the words of any language to ideas different from those in which the common use of the country applies them, however his own understanding may be filled with truth and light, will not by such words be able to convey much of it to others, without defining his terms. . . . Standing for other ideas than those they are usually annexed to . . . they cannot make known the thoughts of him who thus uses them."<sup>2</sup> *La Fosseuse* has not

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<sup>1</sup>Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James Aiken Work (New York, 1940), pp. 344-47. Hereafter referred to in text as (V, i, 344-47).

<sup>2</sup>John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York, 1959), II, 144. Hereafter in the text, Book III, Chapter x, Section 29, page 144 cited as (III, x, 29, 144).

defined his terms in the Lockean manner, yet he communicates only too well; for, as Sterne has demonstrated, the definition by context, whether it be of tone, of character, or of situation, is effective in communicating.

But the passage above also concerns the basis of Locke's view of language, that it functions as a sign for internal conceptions in order to communicate them to the mind of another (III, i, 1, 3). This idea becomes most important when Locke demonstrates that essences, as they are accessible to us, are not something which lies beyond us in another realm of existence, but are merely that core of mutually accepted definitions by which men designate an idea or thing. The true nature of objects and ideas, then, does not lie outside or "exist"; so that if men do not have clear ideas which are shared by others they will not have the same definitions of words, and with this confusion it would be, and for this reason often is, impossible to deal with the basic nature of the world in which man lives. Sterne in his own manner accepts this, and makes it part of his novel, but this view of language has become much transmuted before it appears in the novel's madcap action. For rather than seeing the difficulties of definition, knowledge, and communication as a horrible source of isolation, Sterne sees them as a means to comedy which is saved from the Kafkaesque by a belief that human emotions are a strong enough force to link men—even those such as Toby and Walter Shandy—together in a nonlogical, illogical, and more than logical understanding. Sterne, then, having partially accepted Locke's view of words, that it is often chaotic, often abused, and often confusing because of bad definition, nevertheless sets out along his way to communicate his views and his comedy to the reader. His way is to demonstrate that words can be defined and that one can communicate by the use of connotations which are underlined by context, and in so doing he demonstrates that there are more ways to confute a philosopher than by kicking rocks.

Locke had written that "all the artificial and figurative applications of words that eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats. . . . They are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned cannot but be thought a great fault"

(III, x, 34, 146). Locke believes that words can only function effectively when denotations, the definitions formulated within a purely intellectual context, carry the burden of meaning. This denies the value of literature, which largely communicates not by denotation but by the indirect definition the context of a dramatic situation provides. *La Fosseuse* demonstrates the possibility of such definition by context, and such definition is actually implicit in Locke's view of language: Locke's view is that because nature is only organized and hence only accessible in words which are, in turn, signs of ideas in the mind, one must go to the mind to understand what is meant when a person speaks of external reality. The minds of the speaker and the listener, then, are the contexts to which the word is related and by which it is defined (III, ix, 4, 105). Locke's attempt to define the bounds of human understanding leads to a consideration of the manner in which the mind works (Introduction, 2-4, 26-8), and, similarly, his concern with language leads to a need for knowledge of what the speaker means by a word; for each person has his own definition that is slightly different than anyone else's, and to communicate one must have some knowledge of what a word means in the context of the other person's mind. After asking Uncle Toby where he received his wound, the Widow Wadman would certainly agree:

My uncle *Toby* returned into the parlour, and sat himself down again upon the sopha.

You shall lay your finger upon the place—said my uncle *Toby*.—I will not touch it, however, quoth Mrs. *Wadman* to herself.

This requires a second translation—it shews what little knowledge is gotten by mere words—we must go to the first springs. (IX, xx, 624)

This second translation requires the gloss of each character's mind, for it is in this context, in this little world, that one must discover meanings for words. Sterne has produced comedy by making these contexts far more individual, far more private, far more hobby-horsical than Locke intended, and what he has done is to concertize an abstract idea, that is, to illustrate it and to qualify it, by bringing it from the category of words to the category of things. This placement of something from the world of abstract language in the world which represents everyday life produces an incongruity which is comic and may

be, when recognizably derived from a particular source, satirical as well. A good example of Sterne's general method occurs when Trim enters the learned discussion about radical dryness and moisture:

And what conclusion dost thou draw, Corporal *Trim*,  
cried my father, from all these premises?

I infer, an' please your worship, replied *Trim*, that the radical moisture is nothing in the world but ditch-water—and that the radical heat, of those who can go to the expense of it, is burnt brandy—the radical heat and moisture of a private man, an' please your honours, is nothing but ditch-water—and a dram of geneva—and give us but enough of it, with a pipe of tobacco, to give us the spirits, and drive away the vapours—we know not what it is to fear death.

(V, xl, 401-2)

That Trim should enter the discussion at all, or that he should use the scholastic term of inference, is one aspect of Trim's world encountering Walter's, but the final encounter is the ossification of Walter's abstract idea by something from the world of existence. This *reductio ad absurdum* which causes or which results from the clashing of two worlds, two contexts, or two categories, is Sterne's primary comic technique, and it is, in essence, a comic extension of Locke which takes the philosopher from the world of his study into the world of action and conversation. In relation to the characters, the contexts may be those of the everyday world, those of the everyday world and a private one, or those of two private, isolated worlds, such as those in which Toby and Walter live.

Some of the finest comic scenes arise from the collision of the world of Toby and the world of Walter, but before Sterne can capitalize upon these collisions he must first establish the worlds of his characters, and he begins this early in *Tristram Shandy*. Hearing the noise of running feet over their heads while they are waiting for the birth of Tristram, Walter turns to Toby and asks him,

—I wonder what's all that noise, and running backwards and forwards for, above stairs. . . . —What can they be doing, brother? . . .

I think, replied my uncle *Toby*, taking his pipe from his mouth, and striking the head of it two or three times upon the nail of his left thumb, as he began his sentence, —I think, says he:—But to enter rightly into my uncle

*Toby's* sentiments upon this matter, you must be made to enter first a little into his character, the outlines of which I shall just give you, and then the dialogue between him and my father will go on as well again. (I, xxi, 63)

This explanatory digression takes thirty-six pages in the Work text before we are returned to the next part of that sentence, but in that period Sterne has been able to establish Toby's hobby-horse, his modesty, and his history. Sterne sets the words of his characters firmly within the context of their personalities. In the case of Walter and Toby these personalities are isolating factors causing them to see everything in terms of their particular hobby-horse. In any conversation between these two humor characters there is almost certain to be a lapse in communication as soon as an area of mutual hobby-horsicality is encountered.

At the one point when Walter seems to understand Toby's way of seeing things and hence appears to be communicating, it turns out, instead, that the subject of concern is not a bridge for Toby's fortifications but for his son's nose, which, along with Walter's own hobby-horse, has just been crushed by Slop's forceps—"Lead me, brother *Toby*, cried my father, to my room this instant" (III, xxvii, 215). And this, of course, requires the digression of fifty-eight pages which presents the world of Walter's mind and its belief in the importance of names, noses, birth, and education—all in some sense a comic commentary on both Walter and on Locke. My father "was serious;—he was all uniformity;—he was systematical, and, like all systematick reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture every thing in nature to support his hypothesis. In a word, I repeat it over again;—he was serious" (I, xix, 53). Though he is well-meaning, this serious man's attempts to mold the world into system and pattern appear as the greatest absurdities, and, as his ossified vision continually peeps out upon the flux about him, he becomes both the target of gentle satire and the cause of comedy. Walter assures Yorick with the solemnity of science "that there is a North-West passage to the intellectual world. . . . —The whole depends, added my father, in a low voice, upon the *auxiliary verbs*, Mr. Yorick. Had *Yorick* tread upon *Virgil's* snake, he could not have been more surprised" (V, xlvi, 404). Once again Walter's hobby-horse has thrust something of apparently minor importance into

contact with something of a very different scale; and the difference in scale causes the surprise of an expectation which has been denied. The confrontation of two scales of value, of two contexts, reduces Walter's concern with auxiliary verbs to the level of absurdity. This typical reduction of an idea to absurdity by carrying it beyond its usual context derives additional force because Locke, in his chapter "Of Particles," makes much of a similar matter.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that Locke was working with abstract ideas in his study and that to remove them from this context will naturally make them absurd; and to mock them is perhaps too unfair to Locke. But one point for which Locke cannot be excused, says Sterne, is his unbalanced and unbalancing elevation of understanding above wit and emotion, when the fact of the matter is that all must always be in balance. To one who sees the world as comedy the denial of importance to wit is the more alarming, because it "has been made the *Magna Carta* of *stupidity*" (III, xx, 202), enabling those without wit and humor to claim solemn wisdom as their realm, while Sterne, one feels, would hold that wisdom is never solemn. Sterne says he does not write his book for such serious ones, but he does write it with them, with Mr. John Locke and Mr. Walter Shandy. "My father, whose way was to force every event in nature into an hypothesis, by which means never man crucified TRUTH at the rate he did" (IX, xxxii, 644), tries continually to impose system on all around him, while brother Toby, who sees everything in relation to his military hobby-horse, bumblingly ex-

<sup>3</sup>Locke's "Of Particles" (III, 98-100) ends with an example of different uses of particles and this is probably parodied by the close of Sterne's Chapter xlili, Vol. V,—

A WHITE BEAR! Very well. Have I ever seen one? Might I ever have seen one? Am I ever to see one? Ought I ever to see one? Or can I ever see one?

Would I had seen a white bear! (for how can I imagine it?)

If I should see a white bear, what should I say? If I should never see a white bear, what then?

If I never have, can, must or shall see a white bear alive; have I ever seen the skin of one? Did I ever seen one painted?—described? Have I ever dreamed of one?

Did my father, mother, uncle, brothers or sisters, ever see a white bear? What would they give? How would they behave? How would the white bear have behaved? Is he wild? Tame? Terrible? Rough? Smooth?

—Is the white bear worth seeing?—

—Is three no sin in it?—

Is it better than a BLACK ONE? (pp. 406-407)

Once again, Sterne transfers something from one context to another, gradually taking the questions not as exercises but as actual inquiries.

poses his obsession by taking everything as though it had immediate relevance to his own world: these two men are incarnations of Locke's statements in Chapter X, "The Abuse of Words," and as such they fulfill our expectations, for their contexts are so personal that they cannot communicate by words. After Toby has led Walter to his room, and after Sterne has carefully provided the setting with an elaborate description of Walter's posture of grief, he has Walter break the silence as follows—

Did ever man, brother *Toby*, cried my father, rising himself up upon his elbow, and turning himself round to the opposite side of the bed where my uncle *Toby* was sitting in his old fringed chair, with his chin resting upon his crutch—did ever a poor unfortunate man, brother *Toby*, cried my father, receive so many lashes?—The most I ever saw given, quoth my uncle *Toby*, (ringing the bell at the bed's head for *Trim*) was to a grenadier, I think in *Makay's* regiment.—Had my uncle *Toby* shot a bullet through my father's heart, he could not have fallen down with his nose upon the quilt more suddenly.

Bless me! said my uncle *Toby*. (IV, iii, 274)

Although they are aware of each other's hobby-horse, they are nevertheless so concerned with their own that they cannot communicate with words, and their Marx brothers' dialogue continually impinges the world, the humor, the context of the one upon the other with the resultant double-meanings and plays on word and idea. But this does not leave Walter and Toby and us in isolated boxes, ghostly Robinson Crusoes (to quote Ryle) living within the mechanical islands of our bodies; for granted that, because no one has the same context, denotational, philosophical language will, for all its occasional efficiency, be most often subject to misunderstanding. Nonetheless, human beings have two means of communication: there is human feeling, which is the language of benevolence, and connotational meanings, which are the language of art. These cut across, even if they do not explain, the "riddles and mysteries" (IV, xvii, 293) among which we live. For all that Toby and Walter can rarely explain their ideas to each other, their good natures bind them together in a firm understanding. For example, after Trim has cut up Walter's boots for siege mortars to be used in Toby's scale-model war, a peculiarly chaotic conversation occurs, but, at last, "My father could not help smiling for his soul;—his

anger at the worst was never more than a spark,—and the zeal and simplicity of *Trim*,—and the generous (tho' hobby-horsical) gallantry of my uncle *Toby*, brought him into perfect good humour with them again" (III, xxii, 206). The communication that takes place is not by the denotation of the words, but through the conclusions indirectly drawn by Walter—that *Trim* is zealous and simple and good in *Toby*'s behalf, and that *Toby* is generously gallant for the sake of his country, both of which are perceived from a long-established context. Sterne has shown that Locke's views of language are, in one aspect, quite correct, and he has used the problem of definition for his comedy. On the other hand, he has shown, first, that such problems of definition and communication are not of ultimate importance in relation to his characters; and second, that art, which defines in a non-Lockean manner, is a proper means of communication. Sterne has accepted definition by context, carried it beyond what Locke intended, and shown that, contrary to Locke's assertions, such definition by artistic context works better than attempts at denotational communication.

Walter's method of understanding once again points up Sterne's emphasis upon the indirect aspects of communication. The context of *Toby*'s goodness evokes the best of Walter's feelings, and this reliance upon the benevolence of feeling is dependent upon and derived from two major influences upon Sterne, the church and Locke: The favorable attitude toward feeling is in large part the result of the Latitudinarian movement in the church<sup>4</sup> and it is further supported by Locke's empiricism, which implies that, since all knowledge must be derived from experience, [therefore] all experience, all sensation must be good.<sup>5</sup> Sterne not only believes wit and judgment cannot be separated, but that "REASON is half of it SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions" (VII, xiii, 494). While this

<sup>4</sup>See R. S. Crane, "Suggestions towards a Genealogy of 'The Man of Feeling,'" *ELH*, I (1934), 205-230.

<sup>5</sup>See Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel, Form and Function* (New York and Evanston, 1961), pp. 95-100. Similar is John Traugott's remark that "The following definition of sentimentalism at least suits Sterne's practice: By sensory apprehension of the behavior of other persons, and by comparing that behavior by an association of ideas with our own, we conceive a sympathy with other persons. . . . The core of Sterne's sentimentalism lies in his insistence that by certain public signs . . . we can come to understand individuality." *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954), pp. 73-5.

has many meanings and many contexts, among them that reason is empirically derived, it also means that "A man's body and his mind, with the utmost reverence to them both I speak it, are exactly like a jerkin, and a jerkin's lining;—rumple the one—you rumple the other" (III, iv, 160). Sterne's need to set things in context, in their complete and proper setting, causes him to see mind and body, head and heart, sex and love, and sense and nonsense in a series of continuums, a vision which prevents hardening of both the heart and categories. This rooting of things deeply within their context, which is one aspect of the wide perspective of a comic vision, makes the logic chopping of Walter and of Locke the more ridiculous. But while there is some mocking of Locke, and while there is some sharp satire, especially that of learned hokum, Sterne is primarily a writer, not of satire, but of comedy: Walter and Toby are by and large not targets of satire but the subjects of comedy. The multiple perspective created by the different contexts provides an irony which leads to understanding, not censure. The importance of these personal contexts requires Sterne to define his characters and provides one mechanical reason for the digressive structure of *Tristram Shandy*.

Thus far I have been discussing context or setting as it emanates from the minds of the various characters, and have been concentrating upon Toby and Walter Shandy, because they exemplify the individual mind as particular world at its most comically obvious. Sterne not only deals with the worlds of the mind, but with the adjacent worlds of art and life, and much of the novel is concerned with the encounter of the two. Sterne creates a fictive reader, the Sir or Madam to whom so many comments are addressed and who sits at Sterne's elbow watching the events and occasionally interrupting their presentation. While this reader provides an excuse for Sterne to address his audience through the voice of Tristram, his narrator, this convention is so used that this audience becomes a character in the novel like those repoussé figures in baroque painting who turn half toward the audience and half toward the scene being presented. Sir and Madam have their own context which furnishes something for the novel to be fitted into, or better, something to which the novel's "inner" action can be contrasted. While, of course, this reader is part of the novel and this is not real life, he or she represents the world of conven-

tional novels and insensitive readers. This aspect of *Tristram Shandy* points up the problems of art as a means of communication. The critical history of the novel would suggest that many actual readers are in the same relation to the novel as is Toby to Walter: sympathy but not understanding. When Tristram assigns penance to his lady reader for not reading his novel closely enough, thus playing a joke both upon himself and upon the conventional skimmer of pages, he would seem to be emphasizing that aspect of his work which is likely to be neglected. "I wrote a careless kind of civil, nonsensical, good-humored *Shandean* book, which will do all your hearts good—And all your heads too,—provided you understand it" (VI, xvii, 436), he adds later in the novel, expecting that it will cure the spleen before it strikes the mind.

Tristram and his reader occasionally carry on a dialogue which is much like that of Walter and Toby, but this comedy is due as much to the reader's ignorance of events, his lack of proper context, as to his lack of perception. In the first chapter this fictive reader creates a comic misunderstanding by the infliction of a usual context and its associations upon the particular and peculiar situation of Walter Shandy's one night a month. After Walter Shandy has burst out, "Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?" our reader inquires, "Pray, what was your father saying?—" "Nothing," replies Tristram (I, i, 5). The creation of this reader provides a means of varying comic distance and perspective, and, because such a device must interrupt the primary action, it also gives Sterne another way of controlling the pace of the novel. This fictional reader is about as close as one can get to bringing the audience into the story, and the creation of this outer circle adds a new context which not only provides additional possibilities for comedy but which also produces an implicit commentary on the relation of the novel to the world outside it.

Critics have remarked on Sterne's devices as a means of criticizing the conventional novel of his time;<sup>6</sup> but more impor-

<sup>6</sup>Richard C. Boys, "Tristram Shandy and the Conventional Novel," *Papers of the Michigan Academy . . .*, XXVII (1951), 423-36, points out that Sterne is certainly not commenting upon Smollett or Fielding, and A. A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (London, 1952), p. 166, remarks that Sterne was most interested in the problems of conventional techniques and their relation to reality.

tant than these criticisms, some of which are tongue in cheek, is the novelist's concern with the relation of convention to the reality it is supposed to represent. We see Sterne's attitudes toward the capability of literature from another vantage point when he brings objects from the external world into the novel, when he inflicts not representations of reality but real things upon the context of his fiction. Such expressionistic devices as the black page which follows the announcement of Yorick's death and the marble page which is to be an emblem of the novel are all attempts to gain a new notation that is more effective than words. Once an object is introduced into the context of a work of art, it no longer is an object for it has become language. The most obvious example, perhaps, is the introduction of the musical notation for "Lilliburlero," which is used to describe Toby's character. Similarly, in the last book Trim gives an eloquent speech without words. As uncle Toby and Trim advance to a frontal attack on the willing Mrs. Wadman, Trim says the final word for the bachelor's life: "Whilst a man is free—cried the Corporal, giving a flourish with his stick thus—[and then Sterne gives the path of the stick's movement]. A thousand of my father's most subtle syllogisms could not have said more for celibacy. My uncle *Toby* look'd earnestly towards his cottage and his bowling green" (IX, iv, 604). But, of course, these strangely introduced elements are not a marble page, a sheet of music, or a pattern of movement any longer; for once they have been introduced into the context of the novel, however uncomfortably or humorously they may remain there, they have become redefined by their present company. Once more Sterne has shown that nondenotative language can communicate when it has the proper context. Sterne here reverses a frequent tactic, moving something from the category of object into the category of word and idea. These contrasts between different orders of reality comment upon the nature of art, and, by pointing out its limits, help keep it—or at least the reader—as flexible as the reality the novel is trying to present.

Just as Sterne tries to keep his language from solidifying, so, too, he attempts to keep his novel and his reader limber, implicitly warning us that conventions are only conventions and not to be taken as reality. But it is the nature and purpose

of all system, whether it be of convention or of philosophy, to limit human experience by the imposition of pattern, and hence to provide an order by which we can live. Systematizing is by nature solemn; it is also intrinsically false, both in that the system must in some areas be an inadequate description of reality, and in that it is too serious about its pretensions of adequacy. Sterne's comedy continually sets the various systems of John Locke, Walter Shandy, and the artist within a wider context, which is fatal to the solemnity of any systems that have pretensions of completeness. By its very nature and reason for existence, a system attempts to provide a complete context in its particular area, giving all the answers and expanding into all the empty spaces; but the eye of comedy is always matching context and system, which, inevitably, is a process of reduction for anything which is supposedly complete. *Tristram Shandy* uses, shatters, and comments upon Locke's view of language. Locke is suggestive and perceptive, but not complete enough, and, like Walter Shandy, he is too rigid and systematical. In Walter we see all the foibles of the system maker carried to greatest extremes. His encounters with life produce the most powerful, most comical commentary on systems of all kinds. At the opening of the novel and in the first long digression about him, the reader learns of Walter's systematizing hobby-horsicality and of its expression in elaborate theories of childbirth and childbearing. But from the beginning, the very beginning, of Tristram's existence the systems topple of their own weight; for, after all, it is Walter's systematic winding of the clock which causes all the trouble. He was a very exact man, and

As a small specimen of this extreme exactness of his, to which he was in truth a slave,—he had made it a rule for many years of his life,—on the first *Sunday night* of every month throughout the whole year,—as certain as ever the *Sunday night* came,—to wind up a large house-clock which we had standing upon the back-stairs head, with his own hands:— . . . he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concerns to the same period, in order, as he would often say to my uncle *Toby*, to get them all out of the way at one time . . . from an unhappy association of ideas which have no connection in nature, it so fell out at length, that my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up,—but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popp'd into her head,—& *vice versa*. (I, iv, 8-9)

The problem with the system is that it does not take into account the nature of the human mind, which includes this association by habit as well as denotative faculties, and this, of course, is what is wrong with Locke. Having realized that his offspring's troubles had begun nine months before birth and had been increased by Slop's forceps, Walter next tries to counteract this with his opinion, "That there was a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impress'd upon our characters and conduct" (I, xviii, 50). This is an extreme example, perhaps, of Locke's point that taking words for things causes great difficulty in thought, but it is also an example of taking words too seriously and of trying to impose them on another order of reality. Once again, Walter's system helps destroy itself, for by choosing Trismegistus, a name of which no one has heard, and which resembles Tristram, the name he most dislikes, Walter provides the possibility for the inevitable Shandean confusion. Finally, when it is obvious that everything has gone wrong for Tristram, Walter begins to apply his system to the education of his son. He begins to write the massive *Tristra-poedia*, but by the time he has set his thoughts in order and culled the answers from the scholastic masters, three years have elapsed, and during the whole period, Tristram remarks, "I was all that time totally neglected and abandoned to my mother" (V, xvi, 375). These systems are not only removed from life but also prevent Walter from living and acting.

Better than all these systems of education are the disordered associations of good examples. Toby's benevolence towards the fly, which occurs when Tristram is ten years old, finds a way to the boy's heart—

I know, that the lesson of universal good-will then taught and imprinted by my uncle *Toby*, has never since been worn out of my mind: And tho' I would not depreciate what the study of the *Literae humaniores*, at the university, have done for me in that respect . . . yet I often think what I owe one half of my philanthropy to that one accidental impression.

This is to serve for parents and governors instead of whole volume upon the subject. (II, xii, 114)

Sterne uses Locke's theory of association, which Locke sees

as "madness," and contradicts the system of the philosopher that will not allow the irrational to be anything but dangerous.<sup>7</sup>

Walter imposes his version of reality upon those around him, even choosing to see Toby's natural reactions as system. His obsession with system is the more comical, because it is always so fantastic, and the more Sterne piles detail upon detail, in the manner of Rabelais, the more absurd become Walter's methods. When Walter decides to put his son in breeches, he sets his immense, top-heavy system in movement, and, once he winds it up, it topples of its own weight. Having consulted Mrs. Shandy, who as usual is annoyingly acquiescent, he next goes to Albertus Rubenius, miring himself in an elaborate confusion of pedantry. Sterne carefully cites authorities for trivial points and indulges in elaborate mock-logical subdivisions, all of which serve to place a load of importance on something which is unimportant. Walter's northwest passage to the intellect, his fascination with Slawkenbergius, and his passion for argument are all things which Sterne uses to comment upon; not only these kinds of intellectual swamps but all systematizing. Much of Sterne's comedy comes from the destruction or stretching of system by matching it, implicitly or explicitly, with other systems and other contexts. He can bring the world of Toby into collision with Walter's, or Locke's into Toby's; he moves words into the order of things, and things into the order of words; he moves systems into the Shandean world of no-system; and he tries to move the reader and his context into the world of the novel.

Sterne not only confronts his two fictional worlds, one of art and one of life, he confronts various times, all of which are observed as occurring in the present. Tristram presents a story in the past as happening before us, and yet he is also the subject of this tale, appearing twice, once as child or embryo and once as author. In the midst of a dramatic scene comes "What was your father saying?"—Sterne is using time as a series of sliding panels, and once again he has burst the context in which we live, creating a vision, which by the presence of different vantage points, is necessarily ironic and potentially comic. Any view which contains the individual world of

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<sup>7</sup>Traugott, p. 47, comments "Sterne's fun with Locke does not constitute a dislike or disapproval of the philosopher," but Sterne is not just playing with these ideas, he is contradicting them, especially where education is concerned.

Sterne's characters, the interpretations of his reader, and the layers of different times must be ironic unless all those vantage points coincide, and in Sterne almost nothing, unless it be a sill and window, ever coincides.

The effect of these various contexts of time upon the novel is that everything, or almost everything, is presented as happening, and, therefore, little of the story is told to the reader. The advantage of this is that the entire action can be dramatic, for exposition as such does not occur; even when Sterne is supposedly presenting an expository digression, he presents it as happening, and it becomes part of the action. This structure allows a great percentage of action, while simultaneously permitting authorical commentary for other purposes. With everything shown as becoming, as in process, the novel groups into scenes which are shown with little explanation, the significance becoming apparent from the context.<sup>8</sup> This occurs in the Phutatorius episode, where "Zounds!" first is heard, and then the explanation follows, tracing what has happened by making it happen again, this time from an accessible point of view. Once again, context furnishes meaning.

This use of time as context in the novel is derived from Sterne's conception of time as individually perceived. After playing with the Lockean idea of duration (II, viii, 103), Sterne deals with it again when Walter and Toby are waiting for the delivery of Tristram.

It is two hours and ten minutes,—and no more,—cried my father, looking at his watch, since Dr. Slop and *Obadiah* arrived,—and I do not know how it happens, brother *Toby*, —but to my imagination it seems almost an age. . . .  
—'Tis owing, entirely, quoth my uncle *Toby*, to the succession of our ideas. (III, xviii, 188-9)

Just as all human beings have their own interpretations of language, they also have their own interpretations of time, for, as Toby says, time is measured by the movement of our train of ideas. Sterne takes this, manipulates it, and as usual, carries it to an extreme. In the process he contrasts inner and outer time, the personal and the objective contexts of human life.

This manipulation of time has been seen as similar to that of Proust, Mann, Woolf and Joyce. In a manner similar to

<sup>8</sup>Mendilow, p. 182.

these modern novelists, Sterne creates Tristram by rooting him in the context of the past, a past, moreover, which is portrayed as important in its presentness. The characters are set within their past, and, since this is to be a mocking commentary of many of Walter's ideas, Tristram's beginnings are found rather far back in time. Yet there are significant differences: unlike Proust, to choose one example, Sterne is writing a history of himself more for others than to discover himself. There is no great need to accomplish this rendering within himself, and, significantly, Sterne's narrator uses much extrinsic information, some admittedly derived from Toby and some unadmittedly derived from the convention of the omniscient author. For these reasons there is not Proust's emphasis upon either the active or passive memory, and, similarly, there is no yearning, no feeling of great loss in and through time. While Sterne would hold with Proust that "Une heure n'est pas qu'une heure, c'est un vase rempli de parfums, de sons, de projets et de climats," and while he might agree partially with "Ce que nous appelons la réalité est un certain rapport entre ces sensations et ces souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément,"<sup>9</sup>—for these are, in essence, Lockean—he does not have the emphasis and tone to claim "ces résurrections de la mémoire . . . cachaient . . . une vérité nouvelle."<sup>10</sup> The primary difference between Sterne and his heirs is that Sterne still has a confidence in the integrity of self, which, largely due to Sterne's contemporary, Hume, those who followed had lost. Hume's point is, that if experience is just "perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement," the self has no unity and is "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions."<sup>11</sup> Hume's explanation for what we call "self" is that habit creates a functional organization, but this is not enough to satisfy many. But Sterne did not have this problem, believing as he did in a fixed character and in the existence of the soul, so he did not endow time with such importance or, most important, with such seriousness. Surprisingly enough, Sterne comes to many of the same conclusions

<sup>9</sup>Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré, 3 vols. (Paris, Pléiade editions, 1954), III, 889.

<sup>10</sup>Proust, III, 878.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted by Hans Meyerhoff, *Time and Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954), p. 32. My discussion of Bergsonian and modern ideas of time is largely dependent upon Meyerhoff.

and the same technical developments from his position as do the moderns with their peculiar concern with time. We have already seen the effects of this view on the structure of the novel. Quite similar, indeed, is Sterne's view of language and his suspicion of system: the Bergsonians, who see time as flow, feel that the mind imposes language as a means of congealing thought. Though this imposition is necessary it also renders all expression falsely. Like Sterne, these modern writers firmly embed their words with a series of widening contexts. Some are so chary of the limiting nature of words that, like Hermann Broch, they construct a *gleichgewichtskonstellation*, a gestalt in which only the total effect of the words communicates. These techniques are much like Sterne's elaborate definitions by context, and his comic vision with its suspicion of system and limitation arrives at much the same point as did those obsessed by time. The major difference is that of tone—but in comedy tone is everything.

This suspicion of system comes from a view which sees that system is never a complete context—it always fits into or against another. Sterne's comedy occurs when he thrusts things from one context into another. Sometimes this collision is caused by and sometimes it causes extreme and absurd extension of an idea, a word, or a thing beyond its usual sphere. Sterne's point is that these collisions always occur and that systems which ignore this are, in their seriousness and in their rigidity, absurd; and while Sterne may satirize particular systems or particular foibles they are most important as comic examples, not as targets in themselves. Sterne's primary purpose is not to attack but to drive away the spleen with laughter and understanding.