

Locke's *Essay* and the Tentativeness of *Tristram Shandy*

by Peter M. Briggs

Truth may perhaps come to the price of a pearl, that showeth best by day;
but it will not rise to the price of a diamond or carbuncle, that showeth best
in varied lights.

Francis Bacon¹

NEARLY all modern commentators on *Tristram Shandy* have agreed that Lockean ideas of human understanding figure importantly in the development of Sterne's novel. But they have differed considerably from one another in their attempts to assess the spirit in which Sterne wished to use Locke. Was Sterne engaged in a fictional translation and exposition of Lockean ideas? Or was he subverting Locke, using Locke as a straight man in the midst of a Shandean comedy? Or is Sterne better understood simply as an artistic opportunist, capitalizing upon the public currency of Lockean ideas about the mind's various workings? And why invoke a philosopher in the first place? Most novelists do not appear to need philosophical assistance to complete their labors. There are no simple answers to these or related questions, as the great range of critical response amply demonstrates.² But the range of opinion itself sug-

¹ From Bacon's grudging and ambivalent defense of the usefulness of fictions in "Of Truth," included in the 1625 edition of *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*. Bacon went on to ask, "Doth any man doubt, that if there were taken out of men's minds vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations as one would, and the like, but it would leave the minds of a number of men poor shrunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves?"

² For particularly useful discussions of Locke's place in *Tristram Shandy*, see John Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (Berkeley, 1954), *passim* (deals primarily with Sterne's adaptations of Lockean notions of human communication); Ernest Lee Tuveson, "Locke and Sterne," in J. A. Mazzeo, ed., *Reason and the Imagination: Studies in the History of Ideas, 1600-1800* (New York, 1962), pp. 255-77 (Sterne follows the "liberating" lead of Lockean empiricism); Helene Moglen, *The*

gests that Sterne may have used Lockean ideas in more than one way, in more than one spirit. It is possible to suppose, then, that Sterne adopted Lockean perspectives on experience, not because he believed or disbelieved particular tenets in Locke's systematic exposition of human understanding, but because Locke's analysis gave him *a set of options* which he could exploit and explore for his own novelistic purposes. (More than a philosopher, a novelist can be satisfied with a world of credible options for his characters and need not reach after the systematic, the definitive, the conclusive.) And if Sterne adopted Locke for the set of options that he provided, then examining Locke's presence in *Tristram Shandy* should help us to get beyond the obvious question, how is Sterne related to Locke, in order to address a subtler and ultimately more important question: how is Sterne related to Sterne? More specifically, how might the presence of Lockean ideas in *Tristram Shandy* help us to comprehend as parts of a coherent design the disparate and often apparently dissonant aspects of Sterne's hero and his novel?

I

When Locke first published *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* in 1690, he consolidated more than a century of speculation among skeptical philosophers and others as to how man comprehends his own experiences in the world. Urging his reader to examine analytically the processes of his own mind, Locke wrote to establish two central points: first, a recognition that man possesses no innate ideas; and second, a realization that all of the ideas that man does possess are derived from only two sources, sensations drawn from the experiential world and man's own reflections based upon those sensations. The individual mind works by finding patterns among the sensations it receives, by comparing new data and its earlier formulations of experience, by inferring connections among

Philosophical Irony of Laurence Sterne (Gainesville, Fla., 1975), ch. 1 and *passim* (Lockean subjectivity offered Sterne the foundations for a far-reaching exploration of the ironies of human life, art, and awareness); and James E. Swearingen, *Reflexivity in "Tristram Shandy": An Essay in Phenomenological Criticism* (New Haven, 1977), *passim* (*Shandy* as a middle term between Locke and Husserl). Probably all attempts to stress the affinities between Locke and Sterne should be read in the light of Duke Maskell's skeptical and cautionary essay, "Locke and Sterne, or Can Philosophy Influence Literature," *EIC*, XXIII (1973), 22-40.

particular instances and general rules from them, by reflecting reasonably upon the design of its own experiences. Inevitably Locke's discussion of man's capacities for thinking and knowing involved a parallel discussion of man's incapacities, the things he could not know reliably either because of potential errors in the thinking process or because some phenomena were beyond the world reported by his senses and thus beyond his powers of reflection. But Locke's emphasis was primarily optimistic—"Tis of great use to the Sailor to know the length of his Line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the Ocean" (*Essay* I, i, 6)³—for if man could not know everything, still he could manage his life in a reasonable way.

The impact of Locke's exposition of human understanding upon contemporary thought was considerable. In the first decades of the eighteenth century the *Essay* was widely read, frequently cited and quoted and debated, and adapted to various current uses by (among others) educators and journalists, satirists and divines.⁴ But the pertinent fact to note here is that Laurence Sterne was *not* writing in those early decades and was *not* a party to the early celebration of the *Essay*; Sterne was born in 1713, twenty-three years after the publication of Locke's *Essay*, and most of *Tristram Shandy* was written in the early 1760's, a full seventy years after the appearance of Locke's work. Assuming, then, that Sterne adopted Lockean notions of understanding as the result of some degree of deliberate calculation, we might ask: what did Locke have to offer to an aspiring novelist? Of course, we have only the product of the experiment—*Tristram Shandy* itself—upon which to base an answer, but at least some advantages seem clear.

Tristram Shandy is quintessentially a book about man's attempt to give a reasonable and definitive form to his experience of the world—and about the inevitable tendency of experience to run counter to man's formulations. The basic post-Cartesian opposition be-

³ Quoted from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975). Future references to this edition will be cited in the text by book, chapter, and section numbers (I, i, 6).

⁴ John W. Yolton offers an excellent account of the early reception of Lockean thought into divinity and philosophy in *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford, 1956), *passim*. For Locke's reception into literature, see Kenneth Maclean, *John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (1936; rpt. New York, 1962), *passim*. Samuel F. Pickering, Jr., assesses the impact of Locke's ideas upon contemporary attitudes toward education in *John Locke and Children's Books in Eighteenth-Century England* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1981), pp. 5-12 and *passim*.

tween mind and world is the central fact not only in Tristram's life as he tries to assemble his memoirs, but in the lives of all the major characters whom he portrays as well. It is even the common denominator among many of the ostensibly "digressive" materials which he includes in his narrative—the contracts and curses, the travelogues and theological disquisitions and critical asides; these too represent man's genuine attempts, however misguided, to find an order in the world of experience or to impose one. Clearly these myriad instances imply a great deal of incidental satire directed against the particular and traditional follies of the learned professions—authors, lawyers, divines, physicians, and others—but in the special context of *Tristram Shandy*, they also signify something more unified and characteristic. In fact, all represent man's poor attempts to formalize and share an understanding of his experience of the world, to charm the inevitable powers of contingency with learning, with formulas, with reasonable methods, with words—and all fall short of the mark. Sterne's subject, then, is man's conscious and continual attempt to find or generate mental designs consonant with his experience; the basic strategies of his narrative are to explore the disparities among different mental formulations and the dissonance between all man's conceptions and the world at large; and his final goal is to assess what human attitudes are viable and constructive, should the splits between system and system and between mind and world prove irremediable, as they generally do. A peculiarly "modern" creation, *Tristram Shandy* is essentially an exploration of man's attempts to achieve a reasonable understanding of experience, written in the name of human awarenesses and attitudes, hopes and puzzlements, which are more complex and simultaneous and comprehensive than "mere" reasonable understanding.

When we see *Tristram Shandy* in this light, it is clear why Lockean ideas of cognition were particularly suited to Sterne's purposes. Tristram and his relatives repeatedly cite, quote, or burlesque ideas derived from Locke—notions of the relation of wit and judgment or of the association of ideas or of man's perception of duration—but to dwell upon such particular and easily identifiable instances is, I think, to risk overlooking Sterne's more general exploitation of the grounding assumptions of Locke's system. Some of those assumptions are so obvious as to require little elaboration: the notion that man has no choice but to perceive his experiences subjectively; the idea that cognition involves a logical series of mental steps which

can be separated for the purposes of analytical examination; the belief that understanding is an ongoing *process*, not a fixed and final product; the realization that any comprehensive exploration of understanding must include the *expression* of understanding and therefore must explore the capacities and limitations of language; the conviction, central to Locke's rational empiricism, that understanding should be consonant with both reason and experience and thus answerable to both standards. What Sterne *did* with these assumptions was not simple and not necessarily Lockean, but for the most part he shared these principles in composing *Tristram Shandy* and to that extent his narrative is fundamentally Lockean.

In addition, there are two subtler points of similarity which do require elaboration. First, in his *Essay* Locke made a provisional separation between man's thinking processes and any notion of his overall character and worth, in order to devote more careful analytical attention to those habits of mind which, at least for the purposes of philosophy, can be abstracted from individuals. Sterne adopted this same provisional separation as a crucial part of his comic strategy for presenting his characters: the fact that a Walter Shandy or an Uncle Toby is laughably fallible as a thinker and a user of language does not necessarily impinge upon Sterne's attempts to assert their overall worth as people—mental fallibility and personal character imply two separable modes of evaluation. Second, Locke supposed that man is of necessity the *interpreter* of his own existence: he can have no idea of himself or of anything else unless he undertakes a long series of subjective interpretations which eventually yield a picture of himself and the world in which he has his being.⁵ (Even Descartes' famous *cogito ergo sum* is not a simple statement of existence, but a personal interpretation of it.) And, of course, it is Sterne's realization that Tristram is both *free* and *compelled* to interpret his own existence and to shape his existence through personal interpretation that forms the enabling premise for all of *Tristram Shandy*.

Not surprisingly, Sterne altered Lockean assumptions even as he borrowed them—by treating them playfully, by personalizing them or refracting them through individual personalities, by particulariz-

⁵ For thoughtful accounts of the difficulties of fabricating a self in a post-Cartesian, post-Humean world, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), ch. 1, and John O. Lyons, *The Invention of the Self: The Hinge of Consciousness in the Eighteenth Century* (Carbondale, Ill., 1978), ch. 2.

ing general issues. Tristram speculates with mock-solemnity as to whether Uncle Toby's exceptional modesty was owing to nature or to nurture, and Locke's sober discussion of man's difficulties formulating simple ideas—he used the analogy of man's difficulty making a clear impression in sealing wax (II, xxix, 3)—becomes in *Shandy* an absurd mini-drama with Dolly the chamber-maid trying hastily to seal a letter to Robin, a servant and presumably her lover, hurrying because her mistress is ringing the bell (II, ii, 86).⁶ In the same vein, Sterne characterized Walter Shandy's stubbornness in his eccentric opinions through a witty and extended double burlesque, Lockean psychology conflated with Locke's defense of private property in his *Second Treatise of Government* (sects. 27–8); by sweating over them, Walter—"as a man in a state of nature" does—acquired a property right in his own odd opinions (III, xxxiv, 221–3).

Beyond such amusements and in spite of them, however, Sterne did imply a fairly consistent set of cognitive principles—basically Lockean principles—which substantially shape his novel. Shandean man has no choice but to see the world from within the confines of his own subjectivity, and Sterne followed the well-worn road marked out by Bacon, Descartes, and Locke from the subjectivity of individual perceptions to the relativity and provisionality of all particular interpretations of experience:

need I tell you, Sir, that the circumstances with which every thing in the world is begirt, give every thing in the world its size and shape;—and by tightening it, or relaxing it, this way or that, make the thing to be, what it is—great—little—good—bad—indifferent, just as the case happens.

(III, ii, 158)

In fact, Sterne continually made strategic use of Locke's insistence that all perceived particulars stand before a potentially infinite background of relationships and further considerations: "there is *no one thing . . . which is not capable of almost an infinite number of considerations, in reference to other things: and therefore this makes no small part of Men's Thoughts and Words*" (*Essay*, II, xxv, 7).⁷ Subjec-

⁶ Citations of *Tristram Shandy* are taken from the James A. Work edition (New York, 1940); whenever possible, references are included in the text and cited by book, chapter, and page number in that edition (II, ii, 86). Sigurd Burckhardt cites this same instance to argue that Sterne intended harsh criticism of Locke, that he meant to suggest that Lockean ideas do not exist, only words (and their attendant confusions) do. See "Tristram Shandy's Law of Gravity," *ELH*, XXVIII (1961), 73.

⁷ W. B. C. Watkins, *Perilous Balance: The Tragic Genius of Swift, Johnson, and Sterne* (1939; rpt. Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 134.

tive perspectives combined with notions of endless relativity help to explain the overall shape of Tristram's narrative. Tristram's life appears to him (and to us who follow his meanderings) as a series of experiential fragments to be reflected upon, parts of a potential mosaic of understanding; if his life is to have a definite shape, it will have one only by means of a continuing series of imaginative leaps and logical inferences.

The same considerations of subjectivity and relativity also qualify all particular observations in his story. Even spatial relationships in *Shandy* are shaped by the perspective of the observer, and it soon becomes clear that they provide no normative standards for accurate measurement. Seven miles on a dark night in the Shandy neighborhood are "almost equal to fourteen" (I, vii, 12), and a midwife with "no small degree of reputation in the world" requires a personalized definition of the world in order to accommodate her: "by which word *world* . . . I would be understood to mean no more of it, than a small circle described upon the circle of the great world, of four *English* miles diameter, or thereabouts, of which the cottage where the good old woman lived, is supposed to be the center" (I, vii, 11). Tristram soon gives over his attempt to define the "world" altogether; whenever someone is described as being of importance in the world, "I desire [it] may be enlarged or contracted in your worship's fancy, in a compound-ratio of the station, profession, knowledge, abilities, height and depth (measuring both ways) of the personage brought before you" (I, xiii, 35). In other words, the reader must supply the world, the normative context, which Tristram cannot—and that world is envisioned as an infinite regression of potential relationships; it is no wonder, then, that all relationships and proportions in the novel (and its relationship to *our* worlds) are slippery and to some degree ungrounded. Lockean wit, the capacity for finding out similarities in unlike objects, depends for effectiveness upon two constraints: the one always mentioned (for example, by Sterne) is its opposite faculty, the distinguishing power of judgment; the other, unnamed but assumed by Locke, is some realistic sense of context. Shandean wit is Lockean wit operating without a reliable sense of context; wit and judgment, too, are in effect licensed to be fanciful.

Shandean man's understanding of the world, like that of his Lockean ancestor, depends upon his interpretive and expressive powers, and Sterne showed himself an heir to Locke in another way by his continual sensitivity to the "accidents" which intervene between the mind and its objects. Man's senses are sometimes mislead-

ing, he often imposes upon himself (hobbyhorsically) through misconception, and his language seems a particularly slippery medium for fixing or sharing his thoughts. Walter Shandy lives in a world of inapplicable learning, ungrounded hypotheses, and words without objects; Toby's penchant for military metaphors leads him away from the real world, not into it; and Tristram's own gropings after appropriate words and conceptions are continually betraying him into digression, ambiguity, confusion, or bawdiness. Confused and obsessed protagonists had existed in literature long before Locke, but Sterne's Lockean awareness of the mind's systems for assembling understandings made it possible to characterize man's confusions more acutely and closer to their source.⁸ That same Lockean awareness also allowed Sterne a deeper sense of what man's cognitive confusions might ultimately imply. Consider the case of Walter Shandy. A serious inquirer after truth, Walter adopts the empiricists' mistrust of received opinions and insists upon examining things for himself. He is independent-minded to a fault: "my father, Sir, would see nothing in the light in which others placed it;—he placed things in his own light;—he would weigh nothing in common scales;—no,—he was too refined a researcher to lay open to so gross an imposition" (II, xix, 145). The man who sees *nothing* in the light in which others see it inevitably lives in a world entirely different from theirs, and, in his more speculative moments, at least, Walter represents a comic realization of one of Locke's greatest worries:

if our Knowledge of our *Ideas* terminate in them, and reach no farther, where there is something farther intended, our most serious Thoughts will be of little more use, than the Reveries of a crazy Brain; and the Truths built thereon of no more weight, than the Discourses of a Man, who sees Things clearly in a Dream, and with great assurance utters them.

(*Essay* IV, iv, 2)

Thought conducted without reference to existing realities is in fact Locke's definition of madness.

The strategic advantages which flow from Sterne's carefully contrived perceptual relativism are many; it justifies and necessitates the free-floating relationship among objects and ideas and words in *Tristram Shandy* and makes possible the odd and ironical conjunctions

⁸ For this reason Lockean perspectives on the mind's various workings were particularly valuable to contemporary satirists; see Peter M. Briggs, "Locke's *Essay* and the Strategies of Eighteenth-Century English Satire," *SECC*, X (1981), 135–51.

(and non-conjunctions) where much of the novel's significance and ambiguity lies; it is the foundation of a novelistic world where no meanings are final except for those individuals who choose to take them for final. Consider, for example, the famous scene of Tristram's conception, when Mrs. Shandy interrupts Walter's love-making by suddenly recalling that the thirty-day clock needs winding (I, i, 5). The implications of this unfortunate conjunction are multiple. How *are* love-making and clock-winding related? In an obvious sense they are not, save in the Shandy family where both occur at thirty-day intervals (if then), and that of course is the joke, a joke which combines humor and pathos. But in this special Shandean world where proportions are unfixed and relationships are mostly mind-forged, all facts are potentially figurative ("noses" are not simply noses, after all), and the love-making, clock-winding association raises serious possibilities which radiate out through the rest of the novel: love is perhaps a merely mechanical phenomenon, perhaps impotent; the difficulties of the Shandy household are reflected in the two partners' inability to fix their minds upon a single object; love and time, or love and death, are inherently at odds, and the inexorable progress of time will inevitably disrupt human loves. Here and everywhere in the novel, possibilities for meaning are multiple and simultaneous, particular and figurative, straightforward and ironical.

The initial advantage of Sterne's strategy of counterpoising different subjective versions of experience is narrative flexibility—the dimensions of experience and its meanings are as various as its interpreters. But the final advantage occurs through the involvement of the reader: in a world without reliable normative contexts, things take on different meanings by virtue of the different standards we supply, we are *forced* to supply, in trying to comprehend the text. A "nose" is a nose or something else, depending upon the context to which we refer it. Uncle Toby's famous gesture of generosity toward a fly ("go poor devil . . . —This world surely is wide enough for thee and me"), which Tristram pronounces more valuable than a university education as a cornerstone of his moral outlook (II, xii, 112–14), is either noble or absurd, depending upon the context in which *we* interpret it. Again and again, we must supply perspectives, definitions, proportions, inferences, even facts, which the text fails to provide. A novel that explores through partial views man's cognitive capacities would be remiss if it did not challenge our own abilities to grasp the things that enter our awareness. Tristram insists that writ-

ing, properly conducted, can be a "conversation" with the reader, and Sterne worked artfully to force us to keep up our end of that conversation.⁹

II

Beyond Sterne's particular amusements with Lockean materials and the strategic advantages which Lockean perspectives offered him as an author, there is a subtle and important "debate" between Locke and Sterne going on just beneath the whimsical surface of *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne quite consistently adopted Lockean notions of the mind's *mechanisms* for understanding, but with equal consistency he reserved for himself the right to interpret the *value* of those mechanisms and the overall structure of the mind in which they operate. In other words, Lockean notions of the mind often appear transformed and transvalued as they become parts of a Shandean view of experience.

One particular section in Locke's epistemology evidently attracted Sterne's special attention, for he cribbed from the same passage at least five times in his own writings. The passage in question occurs in Locke's discussion of the inevitable limits of human knowledge. Locke urged that a reasonable and inquiring man can learn enough from experience to know his own good; still, a thoughtful man will be continually surrounded by reminders of the narrowness of his understanding.

He that knows any thing, knows this in the first place, that he need not seek long for Instances of his Ignorance. The meanest, and most obvious Things that come in our way, have dark sides, that the quickest Sight cannot penetrate into. The clearest, and most enlarged Understandings of thinking Men find themselves puzzled, and at a loss, in every Particle of Matter.

(*Essay IV*, iii, 22)

Sterne borrowed from this passage in two of his published sermons,¹⁰ and *Tristram* echoes some of its phrasing in his digression upon the "unsteady uses of words" (II, ii, 86). However, Sterne's

⁹ For a provocative discussion of the ways in which *Tristram* engages and "educates" his reader, see Howard Anderson, "*Tristram Shandy* and the Reader's Imagination," *PMLA*, LXXXVI (1971), 966-73.

¹⁰ See *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* (Oxford, 1927), I, 222-3 ("Felix's Behaviour Towards Paul Examined") and II, 254 ("The Ways of Providence Justified to Man").

most interesting appropriation of it occurs when Tristram moralizes, rather grandiloquently, upon the obscurity of the goddess Nature:

—But mark, madam, we live amongst riddles and mysteries—the most obvious things, which come in our way, have dark sides, which the quickest sight cannot penetrate into; and even the clearest and most exalted understandings amongst us find ourselves puzzled and at a loss in almost every cranny of nature's works; so that this, like a thousand other things, falls out for us in a way which tho' we cannot reason upon it,—yet we find the good of it . . . and that's enough for us.

(IV, xvii, 293; compare also IX, xxii, 625)

Here Sterne was in effect using Locke to some very unLockean ends: he borrowed Locke's exposition of man's inevitable limitations, then added a conclusion which offers an implicit denial of Locke's formulation of the mind's workings. Locke urged that any substantial good for man must come from reasoning upon known materials from the real world. Through Tristram, Sterne in effect responded that, though we cannot reason upon those things of which we have only partial awareness, still we can find some good in them: if this is so, then the mind must have some other ways of knowing and appreciating than "reasonable" ones, and the world may offer goods which transcend the precincts of reason. "*We find the good of it*" also has implications worth teasing out: Sterne implies that the mind, by a combination of attitude and will, can reshape experience, discovering some good which was not there before; rather than conforming itself to circumstance, the mind may profit by ignoring circumstance or seeking to rise above it. This requires further explanation, however.

The major endeavor of Locke's *Essay* is to sketch out a reasonable and reliable connection between the individual mind and the external world which confronts it. The mind must learn a judicious receptivity to materials from the external world and conform its own operations to the realities of that world; the mind is a relatively passive student, one to be stimulated, schooled, and disciplined by real experience. Locke mistrusted the mind's potential independence from external circumstances, and his discussion of free will offers a useful perspective on that problem. Locke argued that traditional debates over free will misstated the problem: the real question was not whether the will is free, but whether *man* is free, free to pursue his desires or to restrain himself from pursuit by a wise consideration

(*Essay* II, xxi, 21 ff.). In Locke's formulation, then, man's freedom is the ability to be reasonable and to implement his reasonableness in the world; man can work thoughtfully toward his own happiness, and any other notion of freedom is foolishness.

Is it worth the Name of *Freedom* to be at liberty to play the Fool, and draw Shame and Misery upon a Man's self? If to break loose from the conduct of Reason, and to want that restraint of Examination and Judgment, which keeps us from chusing or doing the worse, be *Liberty*, true Liberty, mad Men and Fools are the only Freemen: But yet, I think, no Body would chuse to be mad for the sake of such *Liberty*, but he that is mad already.

The necessity of pursuing one's happiness in a reasonable and practical way is not a restraint of human freedom, "or at least [not] an abridgment of *Liberty* to be complain'd of" (*Essay* II, xxi, 50). Freedom from reasonable consideration was a liberty beyond Locke's ken, and he systematically bound the mind's potential independence from external circumstance into a sane and sensible working relationship with circumstance.

Shandean freedom is of a wholly different sort. While Sterne did not denounce rational consideration of circumstance unconditionally, he consistently satirized particular attempts to encompass circumstances by reasonable means; the products of rational "liberty" in *Tristram Shandy* most often are narrow, self-contained, self-delusive, or simply foolish. Moreover, in the process of casting so much satiric doubt upon man's ability to achieve a consistent and reasonable grasp of his world, Sterne also cast considerable doubt upon the question whether man really *needs* such an understanding. (Here, of course, Sterne parted company with Locke, and the issue between them was not simply the capacities of reason, but a more comprehensive question, the true nature of "understanding.") Perhaps man might be better served by consenting to unreason and inconsistency. Sterne in effect used his fictions to propose alternative kinds of "understanding," ones which work by intuition, sentiment, facetiousness and whimsy, fantasy, and the wry celebration of incongruity. If man cannot pretend to know the world of objects as surely and reasonably as Locke expected that he might, perhaps he can make a virtue of the mind's detachment from that alien and elusive world.

As Tristram flees across France in the seventh volume of his *Life and Opinions*, trying to keep ahead of Death who stalks him, he expresses the view that "rolling about" is better than being at rest: "so

much of motion, is so much of life, and so much of joy—and . . . to stand still, or get on but slowly, is death and the devil—" (VII, xii, 493). Tristram's remark clearly refers to physical motion, travelling, but in the larger context of *Tristram Shandy*, it might be taken to apply to the motions of the mind as well: mental motion is life and joy, and the stillness of the mind is death.¹¹ Consider a second instance. When Tristram describes his father's obscure researches concerning noses, he characterizes Walter as having a penchant for "that speculative subtilty or ambidexterity of argumentation . . . which heaven had bestow'd upon man on purpose to investigate truth and fight for her on all sides." Offered a plain statement of fact, Walter cannot rest until he has explored the "mystic" and "allegoric" significances of that statement: "here is some room to turn a man's self in" (III, xxxvii, 229). Obviously, these remarks are meant as a joke, and Walter's overingenuity at interpretation is a source of satiric humor throughout the novel. However, a serious implication lies behind the joke: in a world defined by subjective perspectives, truth does have more than one side, and finding "some room to turn a man's self in" is a significant enterprise in *Tristram Shandy*, however misguided Walter's specific inquiries may be. The initial epigraph of Sterne's novel, drawn from Epictetus, contains a similar implication: "It is not actions, but opinions concerning actions, which disturb men" (title page, 1).¹² Actions, circumstances, facts are neutral, still, and final, but opinions, the motions of the mind, are various, indeterminate, both disturbing and joyous—in short, life-giving.

Sterne's celebration of the ever-various motions of the mind has many implications, but one of the clearest is a transvaluation of Lockean psychology and epistemology; he had little argument with Locke as to how cognitive processes worked, but placed different values on those workings.¹³ Locke rated the powers of the mind

¹¹ Compare Tristram's characterization of "True *Shandeism*" as that which "opens the heart and lungs, and like all those affections which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely thro' its channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and chearfully round" (IV, xxxii, 337-8).

¹² Work's word "disturb" is perhaps too mild in its implications. The Greek verb in question, *tarassō*, ordinarily occurs in military contexts where it means "rout" or "throw into confusion."

¹³ For a provocative discussion of changing ideas of imagination and of the role of imagination in "understanding" during this period, see Ernest Lee Tuveson, *The Imagination as a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Berkeley, 1960), chs. 1, 4-6.

in a hierarchy stretching from reason at the top downward to include lesser powers—will, emotion, imagination, humor, and others—which ought by rights to be subordinate to reason; the different powers take their value from their proximity to or distance from reason. Sterne's implicit design for the mind's powers is more apposite, more counterpoised; all the powers of the mind have something to contribute to understanding, and all have limitations. So he satirized the pretensions of reason, while simultaneously exploring the other components of understanding, properly conceived; in practice, then, Sterne tended to celebrate the powers of the mind which Locke deprecated.

Consider, for example, the mind's capacity to create fantasies. Locke found little good in this power and dealt with it in the *Essay* only to warn against its seductions. Sterne agreed with Locke as to what a fantasy was, but he saw in fantasy a real potential for human good; military fantasies cure Uncle Toby's wound when the reasonable measures urged by doctors fail, and imagined battles on the bowling-green add life and color to an otherwise drab and frustrated retirement. The Peace of Utrecht is a tragedy in Toby's life—as Tristram remarks of Walter (III, xxx, 217), the mind accustomed to odd and whimsical ways of thinking is vulnerable to odd and whimsical distresses—because it necessitates finding a new fantasy to structure his life (he promptly “falls in love” with Widow Wadman). Sterne's celebration of fantasy is not unequivocal—he charted a thousand ways in which Toby's fantasies are delusive, limiting, and self-isolating—but the central fact remains that Toby's fantasies are life-sustaining, and things that are life-sustaining ought not to be wholly removed from “understanding.” The same might be said of humor; Sterne sought to restore humor (which Locke damned by faint praise as harmless “pleasantry”) to the realm of understanding, again because of its life-giving powers: “I live in a constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles,—but much more so, when he laughs, that it adds something to this Fragment of Life” (dedication, 3).

Sterne's adaptations of associationism imply a similar transvaluation of Lockean understanding. Locke stood as “father” to associationism insofar as he defined the mind's propensity to form anomalous and illogical associations among different parts of its experiences—

Ideas that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Mens Minds, that 'tis very hard to separate them, they always keep company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it; and if they are more than two which are thus united, the whole gang always inseparable shew themselves together

(*Essay* II, xxxiii, 5)¹⁴

—but Locke described the phenomenon only to warn against it. Idiosyncratic mental associations are not a reflection of understanding, but a kind of madness (“opposition to Reason deserves that name, and is really Madness”) which must continually be guarded against, if man is to make progress toward reasonable understanding. Here again, Sterne accepted Locke’s definition of the cognitive mechanism while in effect denying Locke’s estimate of the consequences. Both Tristram’s style of telling his story and the modes of thought of his various characters stand as comic realizations of Locke’s worst fears, embodiments of cognitive eccentricity and arbitrariness. Tristram cannot reconstruct his memories in a sequential way, and he is borne along by the stream of his own associations; Corporal Trim cannot recall the Ten Commandments without going through the manual-at-arms at the same time (V, xxxii, 392–3); whenever Uncle Toby hears a military metaphor the “whole gang” of his military lore rushes to the fore, whether related or not to the topic at hand. From the point of view of reason, this is all “madness” and perhaps a kind of slavery, too, for these characters (except Tristram) are seldom able to step beyond the associative habits which shape their understandings.

Of course, Sterne was well aware that such “unreasonable” habits of mind can mislead and isolate people. However, this is not the *only* potential consequence of giving personal mental associations free rein, as Locke had supposed; there may also be “unreasonable” compensations to balance the disorientations of reason. When Walter Shandy hears of his son Bobby’s death, he launches into an associative train of classical sententiae concerning death and nearly forgets the sad occasion of his eloquent allusions (V, iii, 351–7); his mind’s

¹⁴ Locke’s famous chapter, “Of the Association of *Ideas*” (II, xxxiii), was not included in the *Essay* of 1690; it was added to the Fourth Edition in 1700. See the introduction to the Nidditch edition of the *Essay*, p. xxviii. For discussion of the supposition that Sterne was more influenced by Humean than Lockean theories of mental association, see Chinmoy Banerjee, “*Tristram Shandy* and the Association of Ideas,” *TSL*, XV (1973–4), 693–706.

excursions help to protect Walter from the unbearable in a way that a more "reasonable" approach could not. And Tristram himself knows that the mind freed from reason and circumstance can expand both the dimensions and the qualities of real life, which is *mental* life: "I . . . must be cut short in the midst of my days, and taste no more of 'em than what I borrow from my imagination" (VII, xiv, 495). The "unreasonable" mind can soften the harsh power of circumstances over men and thereby serve life,¹⁵ and Sterne uses his power to manipulate "random" associations to suggest that associationism which is indeed a fallibility of reasonable consciousness can also serve as a creative principle, a generative mechanism, for discovering the unreasonable, often extra-reasonable relationships among phenomena. As Sterne's art everywhere suggests, we live in a world not easily reduced to reasonable principles, but this does not mean that it is wholly incomprehensible. Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby do not have and can never have a reasonable relationship, but they do possess one that is loving, sympathetic, highly eccentric, but also enduring; they "know" one another on terms which stand outside Lockean understanding.

In *Tristram Shandy* the world of experience seems significantly less fathomable than Locke had said it should be. Tristram speaks of the world as an "inextricable labyrinth" (IV, xiv, 432), and individuals seem to participate in his world not so much as inquirers after truth but rather as victims of perverse circumstance: windows fall, brothers die, messages miscarry, love is unconsummated, preferment passes to others, battlements topple on people, horses become broken-winded, noses are crushed, Death knocks at the door. But there are potential compensations even amidst a train of disasters seemingly without end. In essence, Sterne shifted the realm of man's knowledge and of his freedom inward from where Locke had placed it; external circumstances are not so much the objects of knowledge as they are the catalysts of a more inward kind of knowing. If Shandean man cannot encompass or control the world of circumstance, whatever freedom he can have is not in that world, but in his own attitudes, his posture toward experience; he cannot master the contingencies of the world, but he can try to control their

¹⁵ Even Walter Shandy recognizes that man possesses within himself a "secret spring" to balance the perversity of outward circumstances; he discourses to Toby on "that great and elastic power within us of counterbalancing evil, which like a secret spring in a well-ordered machine, though it can't prevent the shock—at least it imposes upon our sense of it" (IV, viii, 278–9).

impact upon his life and cares. Locke urged man to tie his mind by reasonable bonds to the external world; Sterne in effect recommends untying the mind both from a narrow bondage to reason and from a close conformity to external circumstance. In practical terms, this means multiplying attitudes toward the world of experience, for it is in the choice of attitudes where man's freedom finally lies. Reasonableness is a perfectly acceptable attitude, *if* it is balanced and qualified by a multitude of others: humor, sentimentality, whimsy, sticism, irony, enthusiasm, fantasy, charity, self-consciousness, and a hundred others—Tristram and his relatives eventually touch them all.

The human tendency to indulge in posturing—melodramatic posturing, intellectual posturing, sentimental posturing, many other kinds—is one of the central jokes of *Tristram Shandy*, and Tristram himself is beyond doubt the worst offender.¹⁶ But this is a *serious* joke, and it is difficult to define exactly where the "offense" really lies. Reality is not objects, but the play of the mind over objects, and mental amplitude, a variety of attitudes or postures toward those elusive objects, is the fullness of life. *All* the faculties of a man's mind have a role in this kind of understanding, his feelings and imaginings and hopes and humor. If external realities cannot be fixed and known, then let them be teased into shapes to suit the individual fancy.¹⁷ If language will not stand still for rational discourse, then let man play at language as a provocative and witty

¹⁶ Critics who approach *Tristram Shandy* from a rhetorical viewpoint, notably John Traugott, Melvyn New (*Laurence Sterne as Satirist* [Gainesville, Fla., 1969]), and Richard A. Lanham, have been particularly concerned to describe the place of role-playing in the novel. For a provocative discussion of this theme, see Lanham, *Tristram Shandy: The Games of Pleasure* (Berkeley, 1973), pp. 30–6.

¹⁷ In his *Journal to Eliza*, Sterne described himself "turning the world into a thousand Shapes to enjoy it" (*Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. L. P. Curtis [Oxford, 1935], p. 332). He elaborated a similar theme in *A Sentimental Journey*:

Sweet pliability of man's spirit, that can at once surrender itself to illusions, which cheat expectation and sorrow of their weary moments!—long—long since had ye number'd out my days, had I not trod so great a part of them upon this enchanted ground: when my way is too rough for my feet, or too steep for my strength, I get off it, to some smooth velvet path which fancy has scattered over with rose-buds of delights; and having taken a few turns in it, come back strengthen'd and refresh'd—When evils press sore upon me, and there is no retreat from them in this world, then I take a new course—I leave it—and as I have a clearer idea of the elysian fields than I have of heaven, I force myself, like Eneas, into them

(*A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick*, ed. Gardner D. Stout, Jr. [Berkeley, 1967], pp. 224–5).

The sentimental emphasis in such passages should not be allowed to obscure the more comprehensive psychological notions that they imply; whether a person teases the world into new shapes in accordance with sentimental impulses or humorous ones,

game, while the unrestrained motions of the mind explore and celebrate its connotative, idiosyncratic, and figurative aspects. Soon enough, *Tristram* knows, reality will make claims which cannot be denied. Until then, however, why not let the mind negotiate a reprieve, why not borrow from imagination what need not be repaid, why not savor those privileged moments of sentiment or humor or whimsy or sincerity when the mind *feels* exempt from circumstance? Why not, just for a moment, live in a world consonant with the full range of man's faculties? Here, then, there is room for posturing and play, room to graze a hobbyhorse, room for a man to turn around in. Life is motion, stillness is death.

Half-seriously, half-ironically, *Tristram* invokes the spirit which inspired Cervantes and *Don Quixote* specifically as a power of imaginative grace strong enough to suspend circumstance: "Gentle Spirit of sweetest humour, who erst didst sit upon the easy pen of my beloved CERVANTES: Thou who . . . turned'st the twilight of his prison into noon-day brightness by thy presence . . . —Turn in hither, I beseech thee!" (IX, xxiv, 628). *Tristram* qualifies his effusion with self-conscious irony ("behold these breeches!—they are all I have in the world"), but the central assertion of his prayer is clear. A Quixotic mind has the power to rise above the austerities imposed by Lockean reasonableness, practicality, and passivity in the face of circumstance; it possesses the power to reshape the world by its imaginings, by its attitudes, by its willful appropriation of circumstance for its own purposes. Humor and imagination can transform the world of hostile circumstance into something sweet, gentle, and life-sustaining. Life—the mind's life—can be touched by grace.¹⁸

the mind's ability to play freely with its objects implies a similar liberation from circumstance.

Seen in this light, Sterne seems to have anticipated in practice an argument developed by Friedrich Schiller a generation later. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) Schiller argued that man possesses a basic impulse toward aesthetic play which mediates between the sensual impulse which ties him to the material world and the formal impulse which leads him off into the world of abstractions; man makes fullest use of his faculties when he engages in aesthetic play, generating through play a humane world of "living forms." (See *Letters* xii–xv, and compare Lanham, *The Games of Pleasure*, *passim*.) Like Sterne, Schiller recognized that a work of art does not simply represent aesthetic play in itself or for its author but attempts to induce aesthetic play in its audience as well.

¹⁸ For fuller discussion of the affinities between *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*, see Walter L. Reed, *An Exemplary History of the Novel: The Quixotic versus the Picaresque* (Chicago, 1981), pp. 139–46; Swearingen, *Reflexivity in "Tristram Shandy,"* pp. 1–6; Alexander Welsh, *Reflections on the Hero as Quixote* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 13–35, 102–5.

III

The mind's grace is an inconstant and unreliable one, to be sure, in a world where even a prayer for imaginative grace is qualified by irony. The ruling principle of Tristram's mind and of the world as he interprets it is neither grace nor confusion and despair but rather apposition, the uneasy coexistence of simultaneous possibilities. In this sad and vexing world, Tristram asks, "What is the life of man! Is it not to shift from side to side?" (IV, xxxi, 336). So one prays for grace and at the same time feels self-conscious doing so. Understanding Sterne's strategies of apposition is central to grasping the strain and ambivalence in Tristram's vision of experience and in our own often divided responses to the novel.

Apposition is everywhere apparent in *Tristram Shandy*, from the initial yoking of love-making and clock-winding through to the final juxtaposition of Uncle Toby's amours and the symptoms of Tristram's fatal illness. Moreover, the principle of apposition seems to apply at every level of the narrative. Obviously it is crucial to the paratactic temporal structure of the novel; Tristram's adult opinions and circumstances are set side by side with the fragmented account of his conception, birth, and childhood, and all the free-floating pieces of his life can be brought into unobtrusive apposition with one another. Stylistic apposition seems omnipresent as well: Tristram commands (or borrows) many styles, and he often sets divergent styles in close conjunction; here the graceful energy of the sermon on conscience broken up by audience interruptions and a mechanically precise account of Trim's posture for reading it might serve as an example. The characters who inhabit Tristram's world also appear in apposition: Toby and Walter, Walter and Dr. Slop, Trim and Susannah the maid, Toby and Widow Wadman—all see the world and their particular

186-7; and Briggs, "Locke's *Essay* and the Strategies of Eighteenth-Century English Satire," 144-5, 150.

In general, Locke was mistrustful of the imagination and its works; at best, they offered man harmless "diversion," while at worst, they might seduce man away from those reasonable and practical concerns which led toward useful truths. However, it is ironical, at least from the point of view of my argument, to note that one of the few imaginative works which Locke *did* recommend was *Don Quixote*. In "Some Thoughts Concerning Reading and Study for a Gentleman, 1703" Locke wrote, "Of all the books of fiction I know none that equals Servantes his *History of Don Quixot* in usefulness, pleasantry, and a constant decorum. And indeed no writings can be pleasant which have not *Nature* at the bottom, and are not drawn after her copy" (*The Educational Writings of John Locke*, ed. James Axtell [Cambridge, 1968], p. 403). Locke owned a copy of *Don Quixote* at the time of his death.

affairs differently, and Tristram faithfully records their divergent perspectives, side by side. Tristram's breathless and eccentric prose implies apposition, too, as he skips from idea to idea, dropping out the syntactical and logical connections between them: "wit and judgment in this world never go together; inasmuch as they are two operations differing from each other as wide as east is from west.---So, says *Locke*,---so are farting and hickuping, say I" (III, xx, 193).

The novel further offers a broad field for interpretive apposition. "Innocent" and "naughty" readings of a given word or passage stand in ironical suspension, waiting for the reader to be trapped in their apposition. Is Toby's bowling-green "service to the nation" noble, pathetic, generous, or absurd: the various possibilities stand in apposition to one another. Or consider Walter's ruminations upon the sexual waywardness of the Shandys' Aunt Dinah:

---My father . . . was a philosopher in grain,---speculative, systematical;--- and my aunt *Dinah's* affair was a matter of as much consequence to him, as the retrogradation of the planets to Copernicus: ---The backslidings of *Venus* in her orbit fortified the *Copernican* system, call'd so after his name; and the backslidings of my aunt *Dinah* in her orbit, did the same service in establishing my father's system, which I trust, will for ever hereafter be called the *Shandean System*, after his.

(I, xxi, 68)

Tristram's comparison, the Shandean equivalent of an epic simile, holds two objects of disproportionate size and doubtful relationship in ironical suspension. Clearly the effect is humorously absurd---all "backslidings" are not of a kind, and Aunt Dinah was presumably no *Venus*---but what exactly is the focus of the absurdity? Walter Shandy, who thinks so systematically? Or Tristram, who makes the absurd comparison? Or system-making in general, in which case Copernicus is a victim, too? Or comparison-making in general? These readings may not be equally probable, but the real point is that the terms of Tristram's comparison are so incomparable that the effect of his comparison is more appositive than comparative. Unlike simple comparisons (or simple oppositions), Shandean appositions refuse to fix a single principle of similarity or difference and thereby to delimit and focus possible implications. Like Homeric similes or Miltonic ones, they open up a far broader range of interpretive possibilities, a simultaneous and unsettling awareness of whole worlds of similarities and differences to be explored. (It is worth recalling that Tris-

tram's only specific criticism of Locke is for treating wit, the power to recognize similarities, and judgment, the power to discriminate differences, as two separable faculties of the mind [III, xx, 200–2]: Tristram insists that the two must continually operate together, that each one, in fact, implies the countervailing necessity of the other, that the two faculties are *equal* partners meant "to answer one another." Shandean man is predisposed, then, to see all things ambivalently or appositively.¹⁹)

Sterne's many techniques of apposition go hand in hand with complementary arts of narrative suspension. Some sorts of suspension are immediately evident in *Tristram Shandy*: the story that never quite gets told; the conversation which somehow miscarries; the author interrupting a character's speech to describe in minute detail the speaker's attitude or pausing to comment upon the artistry of his story even as he tells it. But there are subtler kinds of suspension which deserve attention. Consider, for example, the marvelous story of Phutatorius and the hot chestnut which falls into his breeches at Didius' visitation dinner. The story opens with Phutatorius' exclamation, "Zounds!" (IV, xxvii, 318) and his expression of pained astonishment. Tristram first analyzes the musical qualities of this "Zounds!", then records the various private opinions of Didius' guests as to its significance, then digresses to tell of Phutatorius' liking for hot chestnuts, then debates whether so-called accidents are really accidental, then traces the course of the fatal hot chestnut, then of Phutatorius' animal spirits feeling pain, then of the churchman's panicked imaginings about the source of his pain (perhaps he is being bitten, not burned)—and finally we arrive back at "Zounds!" (322). What we are witnessing here is not simply narrative suspension but interpretive suspension; Sterne deliberately withheld those facts which would allow us to interpret Phutatorius' exclamation quickly and correctly, and instead, leads us a merry chase through erroneous opinions, irrelevant inquiries, digressive backgrounds, melodramatic psychologies, and so on. This is good comic technique, of course; it serves to insulate us from Phutatorius' pain and prepares us to laugh at him. But Sterne was also playing with our anxiousness to interpret what is happening, deliberately frustrating and

¹⁹ Compare Helene Moglen's argument in *Philosophical Irony*, ch. 3, that all of the major themes in *Tristram Shandy* are realized by being played against their negating opposites.

misleading us, causing us to cast and recast our notions of what transpired.

Later in the narrative, Tristram describes explicitly the same state of interpretive suspension. Walter is waiting in eager anticipation for Toby to launch his romantic expedition against Widow Wadman; Toby and Trim are mired in digressions. Tristram observes, "When issues of events like these my father is waiting for, are hanging in the scales of fate, the mind has the advantage of changing the principle of expectation three times, without which it would not have power to see it out" (IX, x, 611–12). Three is an arbitrary number; it could as easily be ten or a dozen. Whatever the number, the general point remains the same: the mind possesses many "principles of expectation" and is continually formulating and reformulating an order among its experiences in the light of those principles; no particular ordering can be assumed to be final, and even events which are finished can be reformulated indefinitely, as Tristram's memoirs themselves tend to demonstrate.

This idea of the mind reviewing its experiences and adjusting its expectations *sounds* very Lockean, and in some ways Locke's discussion of the mind's workings provides a good handle to grasp Sterne's strategies of apposition and interpretive suspension. Basically, the Lockean mind does work through processes of apposition: it receives disparate sensations which it must endeavor to combine into unified perceptions, and it must compare current perceptions with its previous formulations of experience to arrive through reflection at true understandings in the light of new information. All of this seems consonant with Sterne's practices. But unlike Sterne, Locke believed that man could get *beyond* apposition; apposition is the means but not the end of understanding. Their difference on this point requires careful explanation.

Locke's notion of understanding is fundamentally an incremental one: new information forces a man to refine or revise his previous formulation of experience, and the revised formulation eventually supplants its predecessor. When Walter Shandy "chang[es] the principle of expectation three times," there is no indication that principles of expectation supplant one another, merely that they exist as alternatives. By the same token, Tristram's earnestness does not supplant his humor, Toby's follies do not supplant his goodness, and "naughty" noses do not supplant "innocent" ones—instead, the alternative possibilities continue together in uneasy coexistence. What

is the difference between Locke and Sterne on this point? In spite of the roles of apposition and reflective suspension in Locke's paradigm of understanding, the standard of *comprehension* in Locke is finally single, not appositive: man can and must attain a reasonable grasp of his experiences and of the world which he shares with others. Empirical reason—reason conjoined with available facts—stands as the final arbiter, both in the management of one's own mind and in the conduct of the shared world. There is *no* final arbiter in Sterne, which is why the world will continue to appear to the mind in terms of appositions. If reason is only a part of understanding and must share as an equal with man's other faculties in the work of understanding, then the powers of man's mind are themselves in apposition and everything which the mind considers will appear appositively.²⁰ Reason will always interpret experience in a different light than sympathetic feelings, comic whimsy, or creative imagination do, and all of these faculties have a legitimate though partial claim to interpret experience. Toby will forever be unreasonable, noble, touching, and absurd in about equal measure, and there will always be as much ambivalence in describing his character as in assessing the nature and implications of the undefined wound in his groin; he will be Nature's gentleman, even as he is Walter's frustration, England's patriot, Sentiment's favorite, and Reason's fool.

Sterne's good-humored ease at playing partial perspectives against one another finally signifies something more than strategic virtuosity, something more deeply ironical, indeterminate, and unsettling. Sterne created a fictional world in which the various facets of experience and the mind's equally various interpretations of those facets are held permanently in appositive suspension; the mind and the world that it addresses both appear as the sum of their appositions, and to possess "understanding" in the Shandean sense is to possess interpretive *options*.²¹ The story which does not quite begin

²⁰ Compare Coleridge's famous complaint against *Tristram Shandy*, that Sterne sought to play the white angel and the black angel in our minds off against one another: Alan B. Howes, ed., *Sterne: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974), pp. 354–5.

²¹ In *Tristram Shandy's World* (p. 26) John Traugott argues provocatively on very different grounds that "Sterne's capacity for doubt is his capacity for expression."

Several critics have argued that Tristram keeps his readers off balance without being off balance himself; for examples, see Lanham, *The Games of Pleasure*, pp. 97–8 (Tristram suffers only from a voluntary and self-imposed dizziness) and Benjamin H. Lehman, "Of Time, Personality, and the Author," included in John Traugott, ed., *Laurence Sterne: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), pp. 30–2 (Tristram possesses "unity of consciousness"). But, as Locke insisted, all minds operate by

or end at any specific place also implies an evaluative structure, a mode of understanding, which does not begin or end at any specific place either. Appositions are referred for resolution not to any shared or established standard but to further appositions. Judgments are neither impossible nor useless in a world defined by appositions; Tristram makes them all the time, even if he implies very disparate criteria, and Sterne often forces us to draw our own conclusions. But such judgments possess an oddly double aspect: all acts of interpretation under the sign of Shandy are continually ironical, partly because they are at best partial and provisional orderings of experience, also because they tend to reflect so clearly the mind and character of the interpreter.²² The limitations of man's interpretive abilities are simultaneous with his capacities. This double aspect is implicit in Yorick's affectionate scolding of Fancy in *A Sentimental Journey*:

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.²³

Fancy—or any faculty of interpretation—gives us both more and less than the object itself: more, in the sense that interpretation can lend variety, coherence, or embellishment to its objects (ultimately it gives to us our selves); less, because it misrepresents objects in order to grasp and organize them, because it cannot finally capture “things in themselves.” Man's freedom and happiness lie in his ability to preside over his experiences in the world by interpreting them, to cultivate personal perspectives and attitudes which allow him to rise above mere circumstance. Man's sadness is that he will always stand at a distance from the world of circumstance and find it to some extent impenetrable. It is no accident that Tristram admires Don Quixote—“with all his follies”—more than the greatest hero of antiquity (I, x, 22).

.....

means of the same basic mechanisms. Tristram's advantage over his readers is not that he is self-balanced while they are not; it is that he can orchestrate the divisions in his mind and attitudes while we must try to follow his music. His mind, however, is finally no less divided than ours.

²² Compare Sterne's *Letters*, ed. Curtis, p. 411: “a true feeler always brings half the entertainment along with him. His own ideas are only call'd forth by what he reads, and the vibrations within, so entirely correspond with those excited, 'tis like reading *himself* and not the *book*.”

²³ *A Sentimental Journey*, ed. Stout, p. 92.

IV

The main business of this essay has been to establish two points about *Tristram Shandy*: first, to demonstrate that Sterne implied a broad range of attitudes toward the Lockean perspectives which he borrowed; second, to suggest that Sterne deliberately used the interplay of subjective and variable viewpoints to create a fictional world of appositions in which there is a great deal of interpretive latitude—"room to turn a man's self in."²⁴ It is in this open space amongst conflicting impressions and interpretations of events that the various characters find room to live, to become themselves and to enjoy the selves that they become.²⁵ It is the same open space that allows us as readers to make of the novel what we can, what we will—so long as we recognize that our views are likely to stand in apposition with the equally probable views of others. But there are some generally applicable consequences (and *non*-consequences) to this view of *Tristram Shandy* that are worth elaborating.

First, concerning the moral fabric of Sterne's novel. It is important to note that the perceptual relativism and consequent skepticism implicit in Sterne's methods is not necessarily bound up with moral relativism. Certainly Sterne used his appositionive strategies to explore the relativity of moral perceptions (for example, in juxtaposing Uncle Toby's innocence with his defense of the usefulness of war) and he continually toyed with libidinous energies generally ignored by polite society which lie half-hidden in received language and metaphors. Still, the general accumulation of moral perspectives throughout *Tristram Shandy* seems in the end to argue more powerfully for moral toleration than for simple relativism. *Because* man lives in this

²⁴ It is worthwhile to recall that the writers whom Sterne most admired—Rabelais and Cervantes, Montaigne and Burton, even Swift—shared with him the same impulse toward literary spaciousness, the impulse to establish an open-ended literary situation (whether an improbable voyage or a personal meditation) in which there would be room to try out a multitude of different, sometimes contradictory attitudes. Sterne might even be credited with seeking to use the new epistemology and psychology to provide new grounding for Renaissance notions of literary copiousness.

²⁵ Compare Alexander Welsh's intriguing supposition (*Reflections on the Hero as Quixote*, p. 176) that, since man's various roles are thrust upon him by society and circumstance, he is most free to be and know himself in the privileged moments *between* roles. It might be argued in response to the rhetorical critics who have emphasized the importance of role-playing in *Tristram Shandy* (see note 16) that Sterne's true brilliance comes not from his virtuosity in manipulating traditional rhetorical roles, but rather from his ability to destabilize them, to allow characters to become themselves because the unstable fictional situation leaves them most of the time *between* roles.

world amongst riddles and mysteries, *because* he cannot gain a consistent grasp upon his own experiences and upon the values and perceptions of others, he should be generous, patient, honest, and good-humored; the more inscrutable or divided the world seems, the more necessary the Golden Rule is in the conduct of human affairs.²⁶

Second, concerning whatever formal qualities we are tempted to ascribe to *Tristram Shandy*. Shandean aesthetics, with their thoroughgoing commitment to strategies of apposition, step willfully aside from some very traditional notions of literary coherence. Nearly any formalistic ideas of narrative rest ultimately upon assumptions so widely shared that they are seldom discussed: the notions that narrative action does indeed have a shape, that coherent meanings can be encompassed by such shapes, and that different readers can arrive at a common appreciation of such literary shapeliness and its implications. A Shandean aesthetic founded upon the inevitability of unending appositions challenges all such assumptions: if the powers of the mind are themselves in apposition and understanding is finally only appositive, then the artistic forms which would express understanding must be similarly appositive, tentative, and forever unfinished. A well-formed work does not offer "conclusions" but coherent *options* for interpretation. The subjective mind which cannot formulate its own understandings may well reach for outside assistance— notions of genre, of convention and decorum, of received wisdom and audience expectation—yet all of these props meant to steady the subjective mind ultimately are implicated in its unsteadiness, for they are all subjectively perceived. If one would formalize a work that deliberately challenges our impulse to formalize our understanding, then one had better do so in jest—as Tristram repeatedly does. Tristram also suggests (cheerfully, appositively) that formal constraints are secondary to the pleasures of indulging one's imagination: "to write a book is for all the world like humming a song---be but in tune with yourself, madam, 'tis no matter how high or how low you take it" (IV, xxv, 315).

Third, concerning the historical situation of *Tristram Shandy*. Some modern critics have been tempted to assimilate Sterne's novel to more recent works in philosophy and literature which emphasize the isolation of individual consciousness, to see Sterne as the prophet

²⁶ Locke used basically the same argument in his various pleas for religious, civic, and intellectual toleration; see, for example, *Essay IV*, xvi, 4.

of that "modernity" which we associate with alienated antiheroes, self-conscious irony, and stoic comedy.²⁷ Others have sought to align *Shandy* with older, pre-Enlightenment traditions—Renaissance wit, humours comedy, menippean satire, philosophical rhetoric, and similar well-established conventions.²⁸ Both approaches can be justified textually, but to give either one predominance is perhaps to misrepresent Sterne's position. What the simultaneous presence of "modern" notions and more traditional ones in Sterne's novel really points to is the historical crossroads at which Sterne stood. *Tristram Shandy* is deeply traditional, at least insofar as it was consciously written against the background of and with continual reference to older kinds of literature; to be self-consciously unconventional is to depend fundamentally upon existing conventions. The novel is also significantly "modern" insofar as it is premised upon Descartes' reorientation of philosophy toward the subjective mind which must find its way in an elusive and substantially unknowable world (we overestimate the uniqueness of our "modernity"). But what is most important to point out, I think, is that Sterne possessed an appropriate strategy to dramatize the crossroads at which he found himself: he could hold the old and the new in ever-varying patterns of apposition, lending credence to both but presumptive authority to neither. In this aspect, as in many others in *Tristram Shandy*, the search for understanding is a balancing act, a weighing of interpretive options, all of which have some claim to credibility.

It is important, by way of conclusion, to recall something very simple. *Tristram Shandy* is a book of fictional memoirs which center upon a person, not an idea—and persons are often rather contradictory creatures.²⁹ "Inconsistencies," as Johnson's Imlac reminds us,

²⁷ For some interesting instances, see Hugh Kenner, *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (Boston, 1962), pp. 48–9; Ernest H. Lockridge, "A Vision of the Sentimental Absurd: Sterne and Camus," *SR*, LXXII (1964), 652–76; Moglen, *Philosophical Irony*, ch. 4; and Swearingen, *Reflexivity in "Tristram Shandy," passim*.

²⁸ Some well-known and useful examples would include: D. W. Jefferson, "Tristram Shandy and the Tradition of Learned Wit," *EIC*, I (1951), 225–48; New, *Laurence Sterne as Satirist*, ch. 3; Howard Anderson, "Associationism and Wit in *Tristram Shandy*," *PQ*, XLVIII (1969), 27–41; and Lanham, *Tristram Shandy: The Games of Pleasure*, ch. 2. See also Melvyn New's intriguing essay on Sterne and the "burden of the past": "Sterne, Warburton, and the Burden of Exuberant Wit," *ECS*, XV (1981–2), 245–74.

²⁹ Ernest Tuveson has argued that a major consequence of the prevalence of Lockean epistemology in the eighteenth century was the "dissolution" of traditional notions of the stability of the individual personality. Locke in effect transferred the locus of stability in man's mind from his personality to his ideas, and was content to

"cannot be right, but imputed to man, they may both be true."³⁰ *Tristram* contains many inconsistencies, savors them in other people, and celebrates them as agents which keep the mind—and thus life—in motion. (Seen from this angle, Sterne seems closer in spirit to Montaigne than to Locke.³¹) And *Tristram* does his best to keep us off balance, to keep our minds in motion. He deserves our help. The ways that we can help him most are to surrender to the ambivalent processes of his book and to resist the urge to thrust upon *Tristram Shandy* any contrived consistency of ideas, however well-tempered, that represents a violation of its most basic impulse, which is motion, and its most basic structure, which is apposition. For books as well as for people, life is motion and stillness is death.

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see personality as ever-shifting and ever-evolving. See "Locke and the 'Dissolution of the Ego,'" *MP*, LII (1955), 167-70.

³⁰ Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson and Brian Jenkins (London, 1971), p. 21 (ch. viii).

³¹ Jonathan Lamb explores this relationship sensitively and persuasively in "Sterne's Use of Montaigne," *CL*, XXXII (1980), 1-41.

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