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Humour, Wit, and Society in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* ("The Author's Preface")

Abstract: The present essay provides an analysis of humour in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, exploring its various forms, functions, and meanings. After introducing the idea of the *lex inversa* of humour, which can be observed in Sterne's unconventional storytelling style, it analyses the "Author's Preface" that appears at the end of the third volume of the book rather than at its beginning. The essay compares the satirical criticism of modern introductions found in Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* and the humorous but balanced mixture of wit and judgment in *Tristram Shandy's* Preface. It examines the evolution of the concept of humour in the eighteenth century and traces its various meanings in Sterne's book, from ancient bodily theories to psychological character construction. It argues that Sterne's portrayal of odd humours aligns him with those who depicted England as a land of freedom, where humour played a crucial role in challenging wrong societal norms and liberating humanity from hypocrisy. This sympathetic form of comedy portrays human flaws for communal laughter, promoting harmony and balance. After addressing the ambiguity surrounding the actual subject of Sterne's "learned" satire, the essay concludes by emphasising Sterne's wit as a form of his humour, especially in the paradoxical defence of wit in the "Author's Preface", which he contrasts with the false severity of the "grave folks". The essay argues that Sterne's humorous strategy provides society with a moral foundation of humanity, sociability, and freedom.

Keywords: *Laurence Sterne; Tristram Shandy; humour; wit; satire; sociability; freedom.*



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The *lex inversa* of humour

According to the German philosopher Klaus Vieweg, “Humour follows the *lex inversa*”. (2013, 62) Vieweg quotes the Romantic German writer Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, who, in his treatise entitled *Vorschiule der Ästhetik*, wrote that humour’s “descent to hell paves its way for an ascent to heaven” (Jean Paul, 91). This *lex inversa* makes humorous writings adopt the rhetorical figure of the hysteron proteron, “that before this”, or a world turned upside down. This *hysteron proteron* causes tension in the relationship between world and word, reference and imagination, traditional morality and scepticism towards human manners and mores, or, as Sterne puts it, between judgment and wit.

A mock Lockean disquisition on the relationship between wit and judgment is contained in *Tristram Shandy*’s “Author’s Preface” (*TS*, III, xx, 227-38), which is a striking example of *hysteron proteron* because it is presented in the second half of the third volume of the work instead of the normal position before the beginning of the fictional story. Furthermore, it is uncommon for a preface or introduction in a piece of fiction to be written by one of the characters. Typically, authors write a preface to explain their intentions as writers. Thus, an introduction cannot belong to the same level of the story. In the “Author’s Preface”, on the contrary, it is the narrator of the story, Tristram, who discusses aesthetic theories and establishes his narrative poetics without breaking the fictional continuity of his narrative sequence. He reflects on the most appropriate way of narrating by connecting narrative matters and details through associations, on the one hand, or, on the other, by giving it a formal overall coherence through hierarchically disposed structures.

At this juncture, one may assume that Tristram, with his predilection for digressions and narrative wanderings, has forsaken his tale’s structure and overarching plan in favour of witty but disorienting associations. This approach may seem misguided as the story appears to lack direction. The author seems to get lost in his ramblings, as when he says that he starts “with writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second” (*TS*, VIII, ii, 656). Yet, the “Author’s Preface” is not the result of a narrative mistake but is intentionally placed in the correct position. The third volume of *Tristram Shandy* has a pivotal role in the overall work: it introduces the much-awaited birth of the hero, although it is a disastrous episode in the life of the narrator because his nose—whatever we may understand by that word—is crushed by Dr Slop’s new-fangled forceps.

Additionally, the third volume of *Tristram Shandy* introduces some key themes, with the result that the narrative begins to proceed more smoothly, though not without the usual digressions, towards some resolution, which will arrive with Tristram’s “choicest morsel” (*TS*, IV, xxxii, 401; IX, xxiv, 779), his story of Uncle Toby’s amours with Widow Wadman in last two volumes of the book. Thus, the third volume’s central position in the narrative economy of *Tristram Shandy* is thematised within the narrative, based as it is on an ironic objectification process that materialises metaphors and ironically confers them an almost objective quality. The use of a catachresis to create a pseudo-reification of meanings, thus transforming proverbial or metaphorical concepts into objects, had previously been employed by Jonathan Swift as a means of satirising the materialistic and modern culture

that reduces the world and humanity into mere aggregates of things.

The chapter immediately following that which accommodates the “Author’s Preface” mentions the squeaky hinges of the parlour door at Shandy Hall, which distract the philosophical Walter Shandy from his musings about the best parturition for his child. Walter, a rationalist with an analytical and hair-splitting intelligence, had believed for years that a few drops of oil would fix the hinges. However, the hinges had never been oiled:

—Inconsistent soul that man is!—languishing under wounds, which he has the power to heal!—his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge!—his reason, that precious gift of God to him—(instead of pouring in oyl) serving but to sharpen his sensibilities, —to multiply his pains and render him more melancholy and uneasy under them!—poor unhappy creature, that he should do so!—are not the necessary causes of misery in this life enow, but he must add voluntary ones to his stock of sorrow; —struggle against evils which cannot be avoided, and submit to others, which a tenth part of the trouble they create him, would remove from his heart for ever? (*TS*, III, xxi, 239)

The hinges of Shandy Hall are a catachresis (and a synecdoche) of the “still point of the turning world”, to use T.S. Eliot’s phrase.¹ They continue to squeak and interrupt Walter because he, driven by his abstract reasoning, prefers to discuss them rather than mend them. Thus, Walter lingers in his involuntarily self-inflicted gloom and neglects the opportunity to heal himself through his reasoning abilities. His inaction results in increased melancholy and suffering: “*When things move upon bad hinges, an’ please your lordships, how can it be otherwise?*” (*TS*, III, xxii, 241) The parlour door hinges at Shandy Hall serve as a synecdoche for the narrative structure, indicating a pivotal moment in the development of the story. Tristram’s account of Shandy Hall’s story revolves around narrative hinges embodied in the parlour door’s catachresis. The question arises: will the narrative hinges, by extension, be anointed with the oil of inventiveness or fixed with the hammer of philosophy? In other words, Tristram must decide whether to continue the narration in the imaginative yet seemingly disordered way presented in the first two and a half volumes or adopt a more linear and conventional plot structure.

“The Author’s Preface” shows that the narrator Tristram would like to access greater wisdom and be able to write a “good book”:

All I know of the matter is, —when I sat down, my intent was to write a good book; and as far as the tenuity of my understanding would hold out, —a wise, aye, and a

¹ When comparing this passage to a similar excerpt on man’s inconstancy and inconsistency found in Sterne’s Sermon, “Philantropy [sic] recommended”, noted by the editors of the Florida edition of *Tristram Shandy*, the reifying catachresis becomes even more apparent: “Inconsistent creature that man is! who at that instant that he does what is wrong, is not able to withhold his testimony to what is good and praise worth” (*TS*, *The Notes* 253).

discreet,—taking care only, as I went along, to put into it all the wit and the judgment (be it more or less) which the great author and bestower of them had thought fit originally to give me,—so that, as your worships see,—'tis just as God pleases (*TS*, III, xx, 227).

The narrator adds that he will continue to write using all the wit and judgment allowed to the limited human mind. It is neither a trivial nor an incidental statement, despite the Preface's position (i.e., its being a *hysteron proteron*). Tristram also says that he is writing "as God pleases". This statement carries significant weight, especially considering that the author of *Tristram Shandy* was a member of the clergy.

If we acknowledge the possibility of an ironic or satirical contrast between the author and narrator, then that Tristram's writing is intended for God's pleasure can be interpreted antiphrastically, and Sterne may be considered to be poking fun at his narrator (this is the satirical interpretation of which I speak here below, on pp. 124-25). If, however, we recall Sterne's theory of the "two handles",² we can see both a satiric and a more nuanced form of ironic strategy operating in the text, according to which Tristram indeed writes "as God pleases", with a plan in his mind, rather than simply responding to momentary narrative stimuli. Such a combination of writing "with a plan" and writing "to the moment" combines, in its peculiar way, Fielding's "providential" narrative with Richardson's representation of human psychology. Moreover, it represents a witty way of upholding the importance of moral *and* emotional judgment in fiction. In this witty preface, Sterne seizes the opportunity for a theoretical discussion on literature's aims and modes. Therefore, before examining the postponed preface of *Tristram Shandy*, it is crucial to acknowledge the preface's significance.

The role of "The Author's Preface" in Volume III of *Tristram Shandy*

During the Restoration and early eighteenth century, prefaces were the ideal location for poetic and aesthetic discourse (as, for example, in John Dryden's prefaces and

² In a letter to John Eustace, Sterne writes: "Your walking stick is in no sense more *shandaic* than in that of its having *more handles than one*—The parallel breaks only in this, that in using the stick, every one will take the handle which suits his convenience. In *Tristram Shandy*, the handle is taken which suits their passions, their ignorance or sensibility" (*Letters* 645). See also *TS*, II, vii, 118: "Every thing in this world [...] every thing in this earthly world, my dear brother *Toby*, has two handles". The expression was proverbial. Marcus Walsh notices an analogy with Swift, who in *A Tale of a Tub* (203) discovers "in human nature 'several Handles', of which 'Curiosity is one, and of all others, affords the firmest Grasp: Curiosity, that Spur in the side, that Bridle in the Mouth, that Ring in the Nose, of a lazy, an impatient, and a grunting Reader'" (Walsh 27). Sterne repeats a similar concept in volume III: "(—"Here are two senses, cried Eugenius [...] And here are two roads, replied I, turning short upon him,—a dirty and a clean one"; *TS* III, xxxi, 258). On the proximity of the double-sidedness of *Tristram Shandy* and humour see also Bandry-Scubbi and de Voogd 1-3.

dedications). In his parody of modern writers' obsession with organising "Prefaces, Epistles, Advertisements, Introductions, Prolegomena's, Apparatus's, To-the-Reader's," Jonathan Swift criticised such a practice by exposing the conceit and ignorance of those writers who attempted to describe the whole universe, without having any knowledge of it, of themselves and their limits, in their self-centred prefaces (*A Tale of a Tub* lvii and 85).³ Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, which Sterne held in great esteem (see *TS*, IX, viii, 754; also New, "Sterne, Warburton" 273-74, and Walsh), presents a convoluted series of introductions that fail to reach their intended point. In that work, the "modern" hack narrator is depicted as an untrustworthy lunatic and is ruthlessly satirised as someone who serves foolish, incoherent, and sloppy forms. The hack is revealed as one of the agents of chaos and dullness who create darkness through pedantic presumption and pseudo-science. Swift accuses modernity of succumbing to the "Temptation of being Witty [...] where [one] could be neither Wise nor Sound, nor anything to the Matter in hand" (*A Tale of a Tub* 136).

Swift's narrator is witty in a negative sense of the word. As Thomas Hobbes had observed, without "Steadiness, and Direction to some End", incompetent wits lose themselves in the madness of their own discourse, revealing their inability to arrive at sound judgment (Hobbes vol. 1, 57).⁴ Locke, too, condemned the excessive use of wit and ingenuity when it disregards all constraints and ends up preaching what does not exist (Locke 156-57).⁵ Sterne parodies Locke's stance, which expressed suspicion towards wit as it gathers heterogeneous ideas in a way that blurs their distinction, leading to the obscurity of unreason (508). Others were of the same opinion, forgetting that wit could mean, as Hobbes had underlined, both the flimsiness of imagination and the soundness of a quick and solid mind (Hooker 1-6; see Lund). However, in aligning oneself with wit, one risked endorsing the modern practices that Swift so effectively satirised. So, is Tristram's position like that of Swift's hack narrator, or is it less mad and more fruitful?

In the "Author's Preface", Tristram challenges Locke's arguments, refuting the notion that wit lacks judgment:

Now, *Agelastes* (speaking dispraisingly) sayeth, That there may be some wit in it, for aught he knows,—but no judgment at all. And *Triptolemus* and *Phutatorius* agreeing thereto, ask, How is it possible there should? for that 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. But in answer to this, *Didius* the great church lawyer, in his code *de fartandi et illustrandi fallaciis*, doth maintain and make fully appear, That an illustration is no argument,—nor do I maintain the wiping of a looking-glass clean,

³ Swift might have had in mind, as Marcus Walsh remarks, the boasting of contemporary hacks' prefaces (*A Tale of a Tub* lxxxix).

⁴ See also Alexander Pope's lines from *An Essay on Criticism* (I, 27-28): "[...] some made *Coxcombs* Nature meant but *Fools*: / In search of *Wit*, they lose their *common Sense*" (242). I thank Mary Newbould for calling my attention to those lines.

⁵ As William Hazlitt remarked, Locke took unacknowledged inspiration from Hobbes (31).

to be a syllogism; —but you all, may it please your worships, see the better for it, —so that the main good these things do, is only to clarify the understanding, previous to the application of the argument itself, in order to free it from any little motes, or specks of opacular matter, which if left swimming therein, might hinder a conception and spoil all (*TS*, III, xx, 227-28).

The four pseudo-learned scholars introduced here, Agelastes, Triptolemus, Phutatorius, and Didius—who will reappear in the comic episode of the visitation dinner in volume IV, in which a hot chestnut falls from the table into Phutatorius’s breeches and burn his genitalia—embody typically pedantic, supercilious, and erudite philosophers, the “grave folks” against whom *Tristram Shandy* is written (*TS*, III, xx, 238; see also I, xi, 28, and *TS*, *The Notes* 70). Their main characteristic is epitomised in the name of the first among them, Agelastes, “the one who never laughs” (*TS*, *The Notes* 236). The ultimate target of Sterne’s satire and accusation is neither judgment nor Locke; it is gravity and pedantic thinkers.⁶ Tristram humorously exaggerates Locke’s distinction between wit and judgment, equating it to the difference between farting and hiccupping: a humorous explosion of a false differentiation. Tristram concludes that false judgment, i.e. the absolute and arbitrary separation of wit and judgment, can be as deceptive as false wit, i.e. the absolute and arbitrary conjunction of wit and judgment. This false judgment, which in this specific instance soils its logical argument with a foul analogy, represents the gravity of the *agelastes*, those unaware of humanity’s ludicrous nature.⁷ The implicit conclusion is that humour and laughter unite and connect humanity, countering gravity that seeks knowledge solely through division by separating man’s qualities (and oddities). It is wiser to possess and show a balanced combination of wit and judgment.

In another passage in *Tristram Shandy*, wit and judgment are said to be two distinct yet compatible approaches, like “brisk trotting and slow argumentation” (*TS*, I, x, 20). Wit becomes necessary in order to gain clarity in the subject under discussion and express an opinion, removing prejudices from the metaphorical lenses of pedantic periwigs and overly

⁶ The “splenetic philosophers, and Tartuffe’s of all denominations”, of which Sterne speaks in a letter to Richard Davenport of June 9, 1767 (*Letters* 591). On Sterne and tartuffery, see New, 1994, 113-34.

⁷ La Rochefoucauld, whom Sterne copies when he says that gravity is a “*mysterious carriage of the body to cover the defects of the mind*” (*TS*, I, xi, 27-8; “La gravité est un mystère du corps inventé pour cacher les défauts de l’esprit”; Maxim 257, see *TS*, *The Notes* 70), wrote: “It has been a mistake to believe that wit and judgment are two different things. Judgment is only the greatness of the illumination of the wit, or mind. This illumination penetrates the depth of things. It notices there everything that must be noticed and perceives those things which seem imperceptible. Thus, it must be agreed that it is the extent of the illumination of wit which produces all the effects that are attributed to judgment” (“On s’est trompé lorsqu’on a cru que l’esprit et le jugement étoient deux choses différentes: le jugement n’est que la grandeur de la lumière de l’esprit; cette lumière pénètre le fond des choses; elle y remarque tout ce qu’il faut remarquer, et aperçoit celles qui semblent imperceptibles. Ainsi il faut demeurer d’accord que c’est l’entendue de la lumière de l’esprit qui produit tous les effets qu’on attribue au jugement” (Maxim 97 qtd in Milburn 91 and 322).

severe folks. When people use wit to remove the obscurities that “darken your hypothesis by placing a number of tall, opaque words, one before another, in a right line, betwixt your own and your readers conception” (*TS*, III, xx, 235),⁸ they regard wit as a test of truth that distinguishes authenticity from falsehood. This test exposes all forms of deception, including that of false wits, scribblers, and presumptuous and chaotic narrators, and unveils their inherent misery. On the other hand, unlike Locke, who wants communication to be completely transparent (492-93, 508), Tristram knows that such transparency cannot be had. The total removal of “opaque” matter from the human soul is impossible and even undesirable, as Tristram admits with his witty image of Momus’s glass. If we had a glass implanted in the human breast, the totality of our being would be visible, but “this is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this planet”: “our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood; so that if we would come to the specifick characters of them, we must go some other way to work” (*TS*, I, xxiii, 83). Perfect communication and knowledge are not a matter of this world, and we must cope with the imperfections of our being. The fact that Tristram invokes good communication and, at the same time, is aware of human limitations shows that he is very different from Swift’s antisocial, self-absorbed, and arrogant hack narrator. In contrast to *A Tale of Tub*, where the narrator’s arrogance leads him to produce false witticisms, in *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator’s wit triumphs over any scepticism that arises from the fleeting nature of opinions and the failings of Tristram and his characters. Tristram’s self-awareness, despite its limitations, stands in opposition to the self-absorption of Swift’s hack narrator.⁹

By exposing his hack narrator as being oblivious to the real world, Swift adopted a conservative satirical approach that condemned the modern world and its exponents as false and degenerate because they betray the tradition on which morality and society are founded. On the other hand, his Whig opponents, including Shaftesbury, Addison, and the Kit-Cats, promoted a more “amiable” approach. They urged the emerging society founded on virtue, which replaced the status-based society of the *ancien régime* (see McKeon 131-75), to adopt politeness as its defining characteristic. Comedy could function as a factor for inclusiveness and cohesion rather than exclusivity and superiority. In this project, humour and wit “are corroborative of *Religion*, and promotive of *true Faith*” (qtd in Klein 159). According to Stuart M. Tave, eighteenth-century comedy showed an ever-increasing interest in a compassionate view of man, rejected Hobbes’s superiority theory, and transformed the pungent wit of the Restoration and the early eighteenth century into a more amiable humour (Tave 44-59). Although wit and humour did overlap, Tave thinks the latter

⁸ On opacity, see also the passage in “The Author’s Preface” quoted above (*TS*, III, xxx, 227-28).

⁹ The contrast between Swift and Sterne has been exaggerated, especially after nineteenth-century writers and critics such as W.M. Thackeray transformed Swift into an “ogre” and Sterne into a lover of humankind. That opposition became a cliché that twentieth-century scholars repeated (see New, “Swift as Ogre”). However, it’s important not to overlook that, despite the similarities between the two authors and Sterne’s admiration for Swift, there are still significant differences in the tone of their satire.

progressively replaced the former (217-20).

The shifting notion of humour

Given the difficulty of drawing a sharp line of demarcation between wit and humour,¹⁰ it is impossible to say when Sterne's wit ends, and humour begins. Even if some passages in *Tristram Shandy* seem to attribute a satirical quality to wit, the two notions overlap. As Leigh Hunt wrote, wit and humour appear combined in *Tristram Shandy* "under their highest appearance of levity with the profoundest wisdom" (72). Thus, Sterne's wit is in part also his humour, as Tristram says it is of Yorick who had "too many temptations in life, of scattering his wit and his humour,—his gibes and his jests about him" (*TS*, I, xi, 29).¹¹ The concept of humour, however, is difficult to grasp as a clear and definite idea. Its modern usage had its root in the ancient physiological theory of the four humours that goes back to Galen and Hippocrates, to which *Tristram Shandy* refers by way of its insistence on the theory of the "animal spirits" – an approach that had become outdated by the time Sterne wrote his work.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, the term "humour" began to adopt its modern connotation, where the laughter associated with it took on a kind and compassionate nature. The most influential writers of the first half of the century, such as Swift and Pope, fought against literary and cultural charlatans and fanatics, using various satirical weapons ranging from wit and irony to biting satire. Their satirical approach diverted attention, in Hooker's opinion, from the evolving meaning of raillery as a more humane form of comedy. It was the result of a paradoxically "progressive anachronism", as it were. In fact, the old notion of humour "was retained as a semantic convenience in distinguishing personality and character types [...] and it was only in this distinguishing of personality types that the humour theory of wit survived" (Milburn 97). Different sorts of wit depended on "tempers", "constitutions", and "humours". While the notion of wit started to decline and the Galenic explanation of psychology had already been discarded in favour of iatromechanical theories, the overall idea of humour as disposition and personality emerged in the form of the *je ne sais quoi* of human being and as a universal feature that

¹⁰ Michael Billig is right to say that "eighteenth-century theorists viewed 'wit' and 'humour' as distinctly different phenomena," wit referring to "clever verbal saying" and humour denoting a "laughable character" (62). However, that distinction was so nuanced that it was almost impossible to separate the two concepts clearly.

¹¹ The phrase seems to allude to a satirical quality of the hendiadys "wit and humour", but the context alludes to some of the other meanings of "humour" that are analysed in the following pages of this article: its medical sense ("That instead of that cold phlegm and exact regularity of sense and humours, you would have look'd for, in one so extracted;---he was, on the contrary, as mercurial and sublimated a composition [...] as the kindest climate could have engendered and put together"; *TS*, I, xi, 27), and its aesthetic, compositional sense ("either in a *bon mot*, or to be enliven'd throughout with some drollery or humour of expression"; *TS*, I, xi, 29). On Sterne's use of hendiadys and other pleonasm, see Lamb 51 and 76-77.

appealed to common humanity.

Consequently, a momentous change in the cultural climate divided Swift from Sterne. Sterne recognises England as a land of humourists – not just of freaks and eccentrics but also of ordinary individuals. Uncle Toby is among its manifestations and cannot be confused – none of Sterne’s contemporaries did so – with the various hacks and dunces of Scriblerian satire, for the pathos with which he is invested and his capacity for empathetically sharing emotions and values. So, we can consider humour as a form of wit as personality, endowed with a social pathos (Tave 221-43).

This “amiable” interpretation of humour can be found in the famous and influential essay by Corbyn Morris of 1744, *An Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule*. Morris advocates for using humour as a harmless and friendly way of depicting human flaws as common traits of our nature. He believes in laughing together with people at their defects as if they were our own rather than mocking their faults. We may call this a sympathetic form of comedy, whereby comic objects might also become objects of pity (in the sense of *pietas*), not just mere compassion. A common feature of comedy was that it did not show empathic feelings towards the object of its satire or raillery.

However, before humour replaced wit as a general denominator of gentle comedy, the term had to go through several stages of semantic development. Wit had to be distinguished from humour when the former began uniquely to signify a pungent form of biting at people’s incongruities (Milburn 268-312). At the beginning of this process, the two terms were more frequently combined and could in part be synonymous, as in the title of Shaftesbury’s celebrated *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, or miscellaneous collections of songs, jokes, mottoes, verses, such as *The Merry Companion or, Universal Songster: Consisting of a New Collection of over 500 Celebrated Songs, with [...] 210 English Love Songs, Expressing their different Passions. 93 Songs for the Bottle, And others of Wit and Humour* (1742), or prose miscellanies, such as Abel Boyer’s *Dialogues of Wit and Humor* (collected in his *The Compleat French Master*, 1694, reprinted numerous times) or journals such as Ambrose Philips’s *The Free-Thinker or, Essays of Wit and Humour* (1718-1740).¹² To some extent, it is impossible to distinguish wit from humour with absolute clarity: if the latter stems and differentiates from the former, it still keeps wit’s ability to gather different ideas, meanings, and characteristics and to mix them in incongruous yet unexpected and fascinating ways.

Notwithstanding the famous controversy between John Dryden and Thomas Shadwell (the latter an exponent of the Jonsonian comedy of humour) concerning the pre-eminence of wit over humour, or vice versa, “the disturbing truth was that both wit and

¹² This tradition would be retrospectively reflected, as it were, in collections that stemmed from *Tristram Shandy*, such as *The Cream of the Jest: or, The Wits Out-Witted, Dedicated to Poor Yorick. Being an Entire New Collection of Droll Wit and Humour* (1760) and *Yorick’s Jests: Being a New Collection of Jokes, Witticisms, Bon Mots, and Anecdotes, of the Genuine Sons of Wit and Humour of the Late and Present Age* (1770).

humour contained obvious similarities which tended to confuse them”. Even Dryden and Shadwell concede that comedy results from a mixture of those qualities. William Congreve claimed that the nuances of wit and humour are too numerous to define one in relation to the other, “yet we may go near to show something which is not Wit or not Humour, and yet often mistaken for both” (Milburn 202). As late as 1884, William Fleet was still asking why distinguishing humour from wit was so daunting.

However, Congreve, in his letter to John Dennis, *Concerning Humour in Comedy* (1695), offered a distinction between types of humour that could also help to differentiate between wit and humour, at least between characters to which a witty satire can be applied and characters that are appreciated and loved due to their humorous qualities. According to Congreve, authentic humour naturally arises “from the different Constitutions, Complexions, and Dispositions of Men” (Erskine Hill and Lindsay 91). Genuine humour could not be discarded, unlike in the denouement of almost all comedies of humour: “thô our Actions are never so many, and different in Form, they are all Splinters of the same Wood, and have Naturally one Complexion; which thô it may be disguised by Art, yet cannot be wholly changed: We may paint it with other Colours, but we cannot change the Grain [...] A Man may change his Opinion, but I believe he will find it a Difficulty to part with his Humour” (Erskine Hill and Lindsay 95-96; see also Snuggs 120). In the new world of mutable, ephemeral, but influential opinions in which writers like Sterne and characters like Tristram Shandy found themselves, the stability and consistency of humour could provide an *ubi cōnsistam* that helped evaluate and establish personality and humanity.

One of the best sources for observing eighteenth-century modifications of the meaning of “humour” is Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopædia*. First published in 1728, the *Cyclopædia* received several new editions and expansions. It represents the best *locus* in which one finds the development of most cultural, scientific, and philosophical meanings in eighteenth-century England. Sterne used it as a reference book for most of his scientific and cultural knowledge and to keep himself updated on contemporary philosophical and scientific theories and discoveries (Greenberg; Hawley). There are various entries for *Humour* in the *Cyclopædia*, the most conspicuous of which derives from the Latin word for “liquid”. From it, a medical meaning stems, which comprises both the old Galenian and a new sense: that liquid is “any juice, or fluid part of the body, as the chyle, blood, milk, fat, serum, lymph, spirits, bile, feed, saliva and pancreatic juices [...] The *four Humours*, so much talked of by the antient physicians, are four liquid substances which they suppose to moisten the whole body of all animals, and to be the cause of the divers temperaments thereof. See *Temperament*”. Chambers explains that “the moderns do not allow of these divisions, the *Humours* they rather chuse to distinguish into *nutritious*, called also *elementary*, as chyle and blood; those separated from the blood, as bile, saliva, urine, etc. and those returned into the blood” (Chambers s.v. *Humour*).

The ancient medical definition is present in Sterne’s frequent mentions of the “animal spirits”, especially at the beginning of *Tristram Shandy*, where the troubled voyage of the little “homunculus”, Tristram’s spermatozoon, accompanied by the “animal spirits”

towards the mother's egg, is discussed in vivid and ingenious terms. Chambers defined the "animal spirits" –itself a concept under debate and somewhat obsolete in the eighteenth century– as "a fine subtile juice, or humour in animal bodies; supposed to be the great instrument of muscular motion, sensation, &c". A few examples of the presence of the medical sense in *Tristram Shandy* can be found in the following passages:

[...] for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost:— [during Walter and Elizabeth Shandy's procreation of Tristram] (*TS*, I, I, 1).

The HOMUNCULUS [...] consists, as we do, of skin, hair, fat, flesh, veins, arteries, ligaments, nerves, cartilages, bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations;—is a Being of as much activity,—and, in all senses of the word, as much and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of England (*TS*, I, ii, 3; the passage is reminiscent of Rabelais and eighteenth-century medical treatises; see New, "Laurence Sterne and Henry Baker's *The Microscope Made Easy*", 599-600).

[...] instead of that cold phlegm and exact regularity of sense and humours, you would have look'd for, in one so extracted;--he was, on the contrary, as mercurial and sublimated a composition,---as heteroclite a creature in all his declensions [here Tristram talks of Yorick] (*TS*, I, xi, 27).

There was little danger, he [Walter] would say, of losing our liberties by *French* politicks or *French* invasions;—nor was he so much in pain of a consumption from the mass of corrupted matter and ulcerated humours in our constitution (*TS*, I, xviii, 53).

Now, Sir, if I conduct you home again into this warmer and more luxuriant island, where you perceive the spring tide of our blood and humours runs high,—where we have more ambition, and pride, and envy, and lechery, and other whoreson passions upon our hands to govern and subject to reason,—the *height* of our wit and the *depth* of our judgment, you see, are exactly proportioned to the *length* and *breadth* of our necessities,—and accordingly, we have them sent down amongst us in such a flowing kind of decent and creditable plenty, that no one thinks he has any cause to complain (*TS*, III, xx, 231-32).

[...] there is something, under the first disorderly transport of the humours, so unaccountably becalming in an orderly and a sober walk towards one of them [...] (*TS*, IV, xvii, 351).

[...] as the bilious and more saturnine passions, by creating disorders in the blood

and humours, have as bad an influence, I see, upon the body politick as body natural—and as nothing but a habit of virtue can fully govern those passions, and subject them to reason (*TS*, IV, xxxii, 402).

[...] what a nation of herbs he had procured to mollify her humours, &c. &c. and that if the waters of Bourbon did not mend that leg [...] (*TS*, VII, xxi, 609).

[Walter] saw a thousand reasons to wipe out the reproach, and as many to reproach himself—a thin, blue, chill, pellucid chrystal with all its humours so at rest, the least mote or speck of desire might have been seen at the bottom of it, had it existed [...]

A temperate current of blood ran orderly through her veins in all months of the year, and in all critical moments both of the day and night alike; nor did she superinduce the least heat into her humours from the manual effervescencies of devotional tracts, which having little or no meaning in them, nature is oft times obliged to find one (*TS*, IX, I, 736).

However, it is the notion of humour as “the particular temperament or constitution of a person, considered as arising from this or that *Humour*, or juice of the body”, that prevails in *Tristram Shandy*.¹³ It reflects the modification of the notion of humour that we have noticed, passing from a Hippocratic theory of the body-mind relationship to a psychological theory of character that, however, continued to use the bodily origin of human attitudes metaphorically. “Thus we say”, the *Cyclopædia* continues, “a bilious, or choleric *Humour*; a melancholic, hypochondriac *Humour*; a [...] gay, sprightly *Humour*, etc.” (notice the transition from concrete functions to abstract qualities). Here are some of the passages in which Sterne uses this intermediate notion of humour:

It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs [the readers’], and from a backwardness in my nature to disappoint any one soul living, that I have been so very particular already (*TS*, I, iv, 5).

[...] to his [Yorick’s] friends, who knew his foible was not the love of money, and who therefore made the less scruple in bantering the extravagance of his humour,—instead of giving the truecause,—he chose rather to join in the laugh against himself (*TS*, I, x, 20).

[...] this self-same vile pruriency for fresh adventures in all things, has got so strongly into our habit and humours,—and so wholly intent are we upon satisfying the impatience of our concupiscence that way,—that nothing but the gross and more

¹³ It is what both eighteenth-century physiology and psychology would call *crasis*, human “constitution arising from the various properties of humours”, as defined in Johnson’s *Dictionary* (see *TS*, I, xi, 27, and *The Notes*, 69).

carnal parts of a composition will go down [...] (*TS*, I, xx, 66).

His [Uncle Toby's] humour was of that particular species, which does honour to our atmosphere [...] (*TS*, I, xxi, 72-73).

Sir, I am of so nice and singular a humour, that if I thought you was able to form the least judgment or probable conjecture to yourself, of what was to come in the next page,—I would tear it out of my book [...] (*TS*, I, xxv, 89).

It is very strange, says my father, addressing himself to my uncle *Toby*, as *Obadiah* shut the door,—as there is so expert an operator as Dr. *Slop* so near---that my wife should persist to the very last in this obstinate humour of hers, in trusting the life of my child, who has had one misfortune already, to the ignorance of an old woman [...] (*TS*, II, vi, 114-15).

[...] forgive, I pray thee, this rash humour which my mother gave me [Walter speaks to his brother] (*TS*, II, xii, 133).

[...] the petulancy of my father's humour [...] (*TS*, III, xix, 225).

[Uncle Toby's hobby horse] tickled my father's imagination beyond measure; but this being an accident much more to his humour than any one which had yet befall'n it, it proved an inexhaustible fund of entertainment to him (*TS*, III, xxiv, 248).

[...] as my father and my uncle Toby are in a talking humour [...] (*TS*, IV, x, 336).

Yet the shot hitting my uncle Toby and Trim so much harder than him, 'twas a relative triumph; and put him into the gayest humour in the world (*TS*, VII, xxvii, 619).

I own it looks like one of her ladyship's obliquities; and they who court her, are interested in finding out her humour as much as I (*TS*, VII, xxx, 626).

[...] and some dismal winter's evening, when your honour is in the humour, they shall be told you with the rest of Tom's story, for it makes a part of it (*TS*, IX, vi, 747).

Sometimes, the material and psychological meanings coincide, as when Tristram speaks of his father's "subacid humour":

He [Walter] was, however, frank and generous in his nature,—at all times open to conviction; and in the little ebullitions of this subacid humour towards others, but

particularly towards my uncle Toby, whom he truly loved [...] (TS, II, xii, 132).

Nothing but the fermentation of that little subacid humour, which I have often spoken of, in my father's habit, could have vented such an insinuation (TS, IX, i, 735).

[Walter] broke out at once with that little subacid soreness of humour which, in certain situations, distinguished his character from that of all other men (TS, IX, x, 757).

The notion of "subacid humour" is a modified version of the ancient doctrine of the four humours, combining an iatromechanical understanding of the body-soul relationship and the Jonsonian idea of a prevailing fixation. Such a revived conception paved the way for appreciating portrayals of whimsical yet endearing oddities, such as Shakespeare's Falstaff, Cervantes's Quixote, and Sterne's Uncle Toby. Sterne's contemporaries were particularly struck by the "pathetic" qualities of Uncle Toby, which were praised in reviews of *Tristram Shandy* and anthologies such as *The Beauties of Sterne*.¹⁴ This cultural and aesthetic shift transformed aggressive satire into sympathetic and social humour. In this modern aesthetic usage, "humour" was still a vague notion, "one that tend[ed] to sound less literary than 'comic' and less cerebral than 'wit', not to mention less enjoyable than 'laughter', a sort of anti-analytic humour for humour's sake" (Vigus 1-2).

When Sterne departs from the technical meaning of "bodily liquid", he uses "humour" to convey the sense of "disposition" or "habit", as in "being in a talking humour" to mean "being in a talking disposition", or in the expression "our habit and humour".¹⁵

¹⁴ The different editions of *The Beauties of Sterne* offer an interesting development of the appreciation of Sterne's humour over the years. The "Preface" to the 10th edition of that anthology observes that "the past compilers of Sterne, keeping their eye rather upon *morality*, than his *humour*—upon his *judgment*, than his *wit*, had liken'd the work to his *Can Chair, deprived of the one of his knobs*—incomplete and uniform" (vi). I thank Mary Newbould for bringing this important detail to my attention.

¹⁵ This is the principal, though not the unique, meaning in Sterne's *Sermons of Mr Yorick*: "instead of giving a direct answer which might afford a handle to malice, or at best serve only to gratify an impertinent humour"; "It was not a transient oversight, the hasty or ill advised neglect of an unconsidering humour, with which the best disposed are sometimes overtaken, and led on beyond the point where otherwise they would have wished to stop" ("Philanthropy Recommended"; *Sermons, The Text* 21 and 25); "they are many, and of various casts and humours, and each one lends it something of its own complexional tint and character"; "The moment this sordid humour begins to govern farewell all honest and natural affections! farewell all he owes to parents, to children, to friends!" "Thanks to good sense, good manners, and a more enlarged knowledge, this humour is going down, and seems to be settling at present, chiefly amongst the inferior classes of people where it is likely to rest" ("Felix's Behaviour towards Paul, Examined"; *Sermons, The Text*, 180, 184); "to know what is good by observing the address and arts of men, to conceive what is sincere, and by seeing the difference of so many various humours and manners, to look into ourselves and form our own" ("The Prodigal Son"; *Sermons, The Text* 192); "[...] from force of accidents from within, from

This secondary connotation had been part of the language for a long time. The *OED* defines “humour” as “[a] temporary state of mind or feeling; a mood. Frequently with *in* and modifying word, as *bad, happy, mad*” (*OED*, “humour”, II. 5. a), with examples dating back to 1525 that increase in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (such as “1711- ‘When I am in a serious Humour’. J. Addison *Spectator* No. 26. ¶1”). From this secondary meaning, other secondary meanings developed in the premodern age that *OED* now records as “obsolete”: “A particular disposition, inclination, or liking, *esp.* one having no apparent ground or reason; a fancy, a whim. Also occasionally as a mass noun. Now *archaic* and *rare*” (*OED*, “humour”, II. 6. a); and “Usual or permanent mental disposition; constitutional or habitual tendency; temperament. Now *rare*” (*OED*, “humour”, II. 7. a). The notion also extended to the fields of aesthetics and style: “Character, style, or spirit (of a musical or literary composition, etc.). *Obsolete*” (*OED*, “humour”, II. 7. b).

A third connotation of “humour” finally refers to the meaning that is now prevalent: “the ability of a person to appreciate or express what is funny or comical; a sense of what is amusing or ludicrous” (*OED*, “humour”, II. 9. a). From it, the phrase “sense of humour” originated as “the ability to appreciate or express what is funny or comical” (P. 3). This last meaning developed from habit or disposition, emphasising the funny but not contemptuous aspects of one’s character or social oddities. In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne mockingly describes this kind of humour as a “hobby-horse”, meaning an “amusement” or “plaything” that governs one’s life”.¹⁶ In a letter to a friend of January 30, 1760, Sterne explicitly states

change of circumstances, humours and passions of men” (“National Mercies Considered”; *Sermons, The Text* 198); “Look upon the world he [God] has given us, observe the riches and plenty which flows in every channel, not only to satisfy the desires of the temperate, but of the fanciful and wanton every place is almost a paradise, planted when nature was in her gayest humour” (“The History of Jacob, Considered”; *Sermons, The Text* 212); “The fact is, mankind are not always in a humour to be convinced,— and so long as the pre-engagement with our passions subsists, it is not argumentation which can do the business” (“The Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus”; *Sermons, The Text* 216); “Self-love, like a false friend, instead of checking, most treacherously feeds this humour, points out some excellence in every soul to make him vain, and think more highly of himself, than he ought to think” (“Pride”; *Sermons, The Text* 229); “[...] the foundation of which mistake arising chiefly from this previous wrong judgment—that true happiness and freedom lies in a man’s always following his own humour” (“Temporal Advantages of Religion”; *Sermons, The Text* 269); “But, good God! how would he be astonished to find,—that though we have been so often tost to and fro by our own tempestuous humours,—that we were not yet sick of the storm” (“Thirtieth of January”; *Sermons, The Text* 311). A last quotation (“how tedious it is to be in the company of a person whose humour is disagreeable to our own”) in “Our Conversation in Heaven” (*Sermons, The Text* 279-80) is discussed in this essay.

¹⁶ The notes to the Florida edition of *Tristram Shandy* observe that a hobby-horse was “a child’s plaything, a stick with a horse’s head attached, thus making clearer Sterne’s constant play on *riding* the hobby-horse [...] Sterne may also have had in mind *Hamlet*, III.ii.135: ‘For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot,’ a line from a popular anti-puritanical ballad lamenting the prohibition of country games and dances, in which the hobby-horse, a participant costumed like a horse, played a large part” (*TS, The Notes* 59).

that this notion of “humour” as a whimsical “disposition” or “hobby-horse” serves as the foundation for his construction of characters: “The ruling passion *et les egarements du coeur* are the very things which mark, and distinguish, a man's character—in which I would as soon leave out a man's head as his hobby-horse” (*Letters* 114).¹⁷

The co-existence of various meanings of “humour” is acknowledged in Chambers’s *Cyclopædia*:

Humour is usually considered by critics, as a fainter or weaker habitual passion peculiar to comic characters, as being chiefly found in persons of lower degree than those proper for tragedy [...] Every passion may be said to have two different faces, one that is serious, great, formidable, and solemn, which is for tragedy; and another that is low, ridiculous, and fit for comedy; which last is what we call its *Humour*.

Although it joins wit and humour in the same entry, the *Cyclopædia* introduces a slight distinction between them that reflects that shift from the bitter and more satirical aspects of the former to the more encompassing characteristics of the latter (here considered as more beneficial to dramatic composition):

Wit only becomes few characters; it is a breach of character to make one half the persons in a modern, or indeed in any comedy, talk wittily and finely; at least at all times, and on all occasions.—To entertain the audience, therefore, and keep the dramatic persons from going into the common, beaten familiar ways and forms of speaking and thinking, recourse is had to something to supply the place of wit, and divert the audience, without going out of character: and this does *Humour* [i.e., “humour” keeps a character together, and a story organic]; which is therefore to be looked on as the true wit of comedy.

¹⁷ Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd, the editors of the Florida *Letters*, write that “Sterne’s interest in the concept of the ‘ruling passion’ is already evident in sermon 9, ‘The character of Herod,’ probably preached in December 1758 [...] and continues in *A Political Romance* and *Tristram Shandy*” (*The Letters* 118). In that sermon, Sterne wrote: “Not to be deceived in such cases we must work by a different rule, which though it may appear less candid,—yet to make amends, I am persuaded will bring us in general much nearer to the thing we want,—which is truth. The way to which is—in all judgments of this kind, to distinguish and carry in your eye, the principal and ruling passion which leads the character—and separate that, from the other parts of it,—and then take notice, how far his other qualities, good and bad, are brought to serve and support that. For want of this distinction,—we often think ourselves inconsistent creatures, when we are the furthest from it, and all the variety of shapes and contradictory appearances we put on, are in truth but so many different attempts to gratify the same governing appetite” (*Sermons, The Text* 86; see also *Sermons, The Notes* 132-33). The identification of people’s “ruling passions” appears to serve the purpose of differentiating their ethical and emotional makeup. The hobby-horse achieves the same effect in a more comical and witty fashion, a technique that blends judgment and wit, as Tristram notes in “The Author’s Preface”.

From Chambers's perspective, true wit can be found only in humour, which appears to absorb the best of wit's functions. Such a semantic shift aligns the *Cyclopædia* with the views of Addison and Shaftesbury, which added political implications to the aesthetic issues. In 1690, Sir William Temple had shown how the love of the English for oddities depended on their passion for freedom: "Thus we come to have more Originals, and more that appear what they are, we have more Humour because every man follows his own, and takes a Pleasure, perhaps a Pride to shew it" (357; see Kliger).¹⁸ In his *Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule*, Corbyn Morris observed that a humourist is a lover of reason and liberty, someone who follows and exposes the ambitious and dangerous actions of rulers. The humourist, in his opinion, is someone who dares to speak out against tyranny: "It is He that watches the daring Strides, and secret Mines of the ambitious Prince, and desperate Minister: He gives the Alarm, and prevents their Mischief. Others there are who have Sense and Foresight; but they are brib'd by Hopes or Fears, or bound by softer Ties; It is He only, the Humourist, that has the Courage and Honesty to cry out, unmov'd by personal Resentment: He flourishes only in a Land of liberty" (Morris 20-1).

Although he does not mention Morris, Sterne would have subscribed to his views. He, too, makes it clear that wit, comedy, and even eccentricity can contribute to the freedom of the British people. While Sterne may have disagreed with Shaftesbury's social aloofness and, conversely, Sterne's bawdiness would have been indigestible to the Whig philosopher, Sterne shared Shaftesbury's goal of liberating humanity and society from the tyranny of hypocrisy and zeal. Sterne's statement that the arch-enemy of wit is gravity implies that wit and humour can coincide in challenging imposed and hypocritical norms and liberating the potential freedom of odd yet sociable characters. As the anonymous author of a 1748 *Essay on Wit* observed, "Humour is the only Test of Gravity; and Gravity of Humour. For a subject which will not bear Raillery is suspicious; and a Jest which will not bear a serious Examination, is certainly false Wit" (qtd in Milburn 205).

"Learned wit" and "Shandean humour"

Sterne's humour became, to the eyes of most contemporary European readers, prototypical of English freedom: the *gaieté* of the Britons and their literature was envied, imitated, and seldom achieved, as Friedrich Nietzsche acknowledged (see Vigus 4-9; de Voogd and Neubauer 80-81). However, Sterne's humour is not always characterised by innocence, amiability, and *gaieté de coeur*. According to Simon Dickie, who posits that cruelty and sardonic satire were prevalent in both eighteenth-century literature and society, *Tristram Shandy* can be considered a "ramble novel" that belongs, at least in part, to a tradition of literary works (such as erotic or pornographic fiction, criminal biographies, playful "it" narratives, and travel memoirs) that "defied the literary and ethical standards of the day" (Dickie 252, 273). Yet rather than the "ramble" mode, it is the Scriblerian

¹⁸ Sterne indirectly alludes to Temple's ideas in "The Author's Preface;" see *TS, The Notes* 244-45.

tradition of “learned wit” in which Sterne’s work is rooted that seems to conflict with the “amiable humour” theory. Sterne’s attempted satirical piece on a clergyman, known as the “Fragment in the Manner of Rabelais” (written in 1759 and first published by Sterne’s daughter, Lydia Sterne Medalle, in 1775)¹⁹ and his short prose titled *A Political Romance* (published in 1759 and banned by Church authorities) are clear indications of Sterne’s intention to continue the Scriblerian work of Swift and Pope (see New, “Swift and Sterne” and “Single and Double”; Regan; Walsh). Sterne’s letter to the London publisher, Robert Dodsley, advertising the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* further reinforces the notion of Sterne as another Scriblerus secundus: “The Plan, as you will perceive, is a most extensive one,—taking in, not only, the Weak part of the Sciences, in which the true point of Ridicule lies—but every Thing else, which I find Laugh-at-able in my way—” (*Letters* 80).²⁰

Tristram Shandy contains ribald coarseness and biting ridicule that may call to mind the style of Swiftian and Hogarthian social scorn or Menippean satire, corroborating Dickie’s interpretation. The portrayal of Dr Slop, when he falls from his horse into the mud and enters Shandy Hall covered with filth, is reminiscent of scenes found in Pope’s *Dunciad* (the diving contests in the Fleet Ditch; see Kolb) and John Gay’s *Trivia* (the appearance of the goddess Cloacina). Not only does Sterne pass satirical judgment on the inept doctor, a portrayal of the physician and obstetrician Dr John Burton and, more generally, of Catholics, or on censorious Bishop Warburton (New, “Sterne, Warburton”), he also targets the hypocrisy, gravity, and “tartuffery” of the world (New, *Tristram Shandy: A Book for Free Spirits* 113-34). His satire is far less topical than Swift’s and Pope’s but comprises the “abuses of conscience” committed by individuals and communities. And yet, even if we consider *Tristram Shandy* as a satire not only on Dr Slop but also on Walter, Toby, and the whole of Shandy Hall, Tristram included, with Yorick as the satirist-scourger of the vices of humankind, we may still wonder what the real subject of *Tristram Shandy*’s satire is. Ashley Marshall (278-83) points out the bewilderment among Sterne’s contemporaries regarding the true aim and scope of his work as they struggled to categorise it: “Oh rare Tristram Shandy!—Thou very sensible—humorous—pathetick—humane—unaccountable! what shall we call thee?—Rabelais, Cervantes, What?” *Tristram Shandy*, in the opinion of many, is a humorous performance, “of which we are unable to convey any distinct idea to our readers” (Howes 52). The early critical responses to *Tristram Shandy* play with the work’s unclear generic status and cast doubt upon its satirical nature *strictu sensu*. Marshall disagrees with those who argue that *Tristram Shandy* represents a friendlier and softer version of Scriblerian satire, stating that it is frustratingly difficult to categorise it as satire because, unlike Pope and Swift, Sterne does not pass judgment onto specific

¹⁹ In Melvyn New’s opinion, the Fragment is an imitation of Alexander Pope’s *Peri Bathous, or The Art of Sinking in Poetry* (*Tristram Shandy: A Book for Free Spirits* 29).

²⁰ In another letter Sterne wrote to an acquaintance in 1760, he declared that he meant to make fun of ranks, professions, and educational projects (*Letters* 682).

categories.²¹ While it is true that, on the contrary, Sterne passes judgment on specific categories, as we have seen, those categories do not represent humankind.

Paradoxically, it was Swift, whom some critics considered the perfect misanthropist, who had to defend himself, saying that he hated all nations, professions, and communities, and principally “that animal called man”, but loved individuals: “I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth” (Letter to Alexander Pope, September 29, 1725; Woolley 606-7). In contrast, Laurence Sterne seemed to dislike specific individuals, like Burton, Warburton, and a few others who are difficult to identify within the dense layers of indirect mockeries in *Tristram Shandy*. Nonetheless, Sterne ultimately expressed love for humanity. This sentiment may have been why Sterne, in another letter, declared his intentions to maintain a distance from Rabelais, like Swift’s detachment from the same writer (“I have not gone as far as Swift—He keeps due distance from Rabelais—& I from him”; *Letters* 84). Sterne’s style of “learned wit” (Jefferson) deviates from that of the Scriblerians to such an extent that his satire becomes distinct from their *saeva indignatio*. If Sterne is Scriblerian, it is in a modern and humorous way. His use of wit is like that discussed by Chambers in the *Cyclopædia*, a “humorous wit” that unites various aspects of wit and humour and refines the concept of comedy to reflect human sociability.

This idea is particularly evident in the image of the “Shandean humour”:

I write a careless kind of a civil, nonsensical, good humoured *Shandean* book, which will do all your hearts good——

——And all your heads too,—provided you understand it (*TS*, VI, xvii, 525).

Sterne’s “Shandean book” is intended for the “good honest, unthinking, Shandean people”

²¹ For a criticism of Marshall’s positions, see New, “Single and Double” 71-73. New advocates a broader view of satire and disputes the use of the term “novel” to describe *Tristram Shandy*. I cannot expand on the satire-novel theme here for space reasons. My opinion is that, unless we consider it as a *unicum sui generis*, *Tristram Shandy* may be classified as both a satire and a novel if we stretch the former to include a larger variety of works, deriving satire from *saturus*, “full”, as in *satura lanx* and *lex satura* (for instance, see Isidore of Sevilla’s definition: “Satura vero lex est quae de pluribus simul rebus eloquitur, dicta a copia rerum et quasi a saturitate”; “A medley [*satura*] is a law which is concerned with many things at once; it is so called from the abundance of topics, and, as it were, from fulness [*saturitas*]”; 118-19). At the same time, we should stretch the term “novel” to include its complex and multifarious developments, as advocated, among others, by Margaret A. Doody and Franco Moretti. The question remains, however, whether *Tristram Shandy* is satirical in the same manner as *A Tale of Tub* or *The Dunciad*. Both Swift’s and Pope’s masterpieces exhibit overtly satirical-aggressive aims almost monothematically. Conversely, *Tristram Shandy* presents complex characters who interact with one another, a character-narrator engaged in a dialogue with his characters and implied readers, and a story plot that deals with individuals’ lives, thin though it may appear. In other words, in *Tristram Shandy*, the *historia personarum* interacts with and takes precedence over the *historia doctrinarum* (the story of the characters’ lives being the narrator’s “choicest morsels”), while *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, despite their being presented as the history of a family, comprise a series of mock doctrinal disquisitions.

(*TS* III, iv, 190), those who appreciate the moral lesson imparted by Uncle Toby's benevolent behaviour towards the fly (contained in the same chapter in which this last quotation is found).

But what is this "Shandean humour"? It is a mock notion that encompasses the bodily idea of "animal spirits and functions" and promotes a gentle and healthful attitude that corrects the imbalances caused by illness (Vigus 3; see also Tadié). The concept of "Shandean humour" is characterised by an individual's benevolent disposition and empathetic engagement, as well as the artistic representation of such a distinct and kind-hearted trait. Sterne's recognition of the significance of socially acceptable humour is articulated in Sermon 29, entitled "Our Conversation in Heaven" (*Sermons, The Text* 279-82), wherein he highlights the potentially antisocial implications of a clash between unrelated and disagreeable humours: "We see, even in the common intercourses of society,—how tedious it is to be in the company of a person whose humour is disagreeable to our own, though perhaps in all other respects of the greatest worth and excellency—" (*Sermons, The Text* 279-80).²²

The idea of humour that emerges from Sterne's works and letters refers to the inner qualities of a person, which can be good or neutral or evil, yet must be considered if we want to know people and converse with them. Tristram Shandy's personal hobby horse is his desire to understand people, events, and ideas through writing, albeit in the odd way he does so. His hobby-horse is as weird as his father's and his uncle's and sometimes produces terrible effects, such as an inability to get to the point or to be coherent. Still, it is also a valuable tool for promoting knowledge, especially self-knowledge. In turn, Tristram's awareness of his ancestors' and his own peculiarities, which he also grasps thanks to his narrative projection onto the satirical character of Yorick,²³ make him an amiable, social character.

According to "Shandean humour", proper knowledge is social knowledge. As Sterne/Tristram states in the "Author's Preface", judgment is not merely based on one's ability to distinguish between ideas but rather on the capacity to find pleasurable agreement between ideas and those who express them, even if this agreement is based on incongruity. This notion encompasses both aesthetic and moral dimensions, viewing pleasure as a social aspect of human interaction: from the agreeableness of ideas follows the amiability of people, the conversation on earth that should correspond to the conversation in heaven in

²² The sentence is lifted from John Norris of Bemerton's *Practical Discourses upon the Beatitudes* (Hammond, 142); see Melvyn New's note to this passage concerning Sterne's use of the concept of earthly and heavenly happiness in *A Sentimental Journey* and its interpretation by Gardner D. Stout in his edition of the *Journey* (*Sermons, The Notes* 318-19).

²³ Yorick is not Tristram, of course; however, Tristram absorbs some of Yorick's characteristics, language, and ethos. The final words of *Tristram Shandy* about the "cock and bull story" belong to Yorick but are indistinguishable from Tristram's *ductus*. In fact, they give a kind of circularity and closeness to the whole of *Tristram Shandy*'s story. They are, as it were, the last bite of his own choicest morsel, after the story of Toby's amours with Widow Wadman and their conclusion under the aegis of Charron's thought (see Gregori, "Making and Unmaking Man" 18).

which men are found in their “gayest humour”.²⁴ As Simon Critchley writes, “raillery and ridicule can be defended as far as they enable instruction in reason by making its use pleasurable. One is more likely to use reason if its use gives pleasure. Therefore, liberty is precisely a freedom in wit and humour. The measure of liberty to which reason appeals, for Shaftesbury, is *sensus communis*, sociableness, one’s willingness and ability to be “friendly and communicative” (43).

On the one hand, laughter can target certain attitudes and behaviours (hypocrisy, religious absurdity, gravity, etc.) and the people representing them (Dr Slop, the pedantic Doctors of the Sorbonne, the learned scholars who meet at the visitation dinner). On the other, it also is shared “with” others, becoming a social laughter in *Tristram Shandy*. As Alexis Tadié explains, laughter “is more frequently associated with a sense of community, if not communion, of the Shandy family – it reveals the ‘secret bond’ [between us and our fellow-creatures] identified by [Francis] Hutcheson” (34). John Mullan describes Sterne’s humour as a unique narrative strategy that allows his readers to establish social connections with his narrator. Unlike the Scriblerian hack, who is alienated from his readers (as from anyone else), Tristram encourages and establishes communication with his readers. Even the examples of misunderstanding and failed communication in *Tristram Shandy* serve to emphasise the importance of humorous communication. Mullan offers the example of the two Shandy brothers, who often, though unintentionally, exhibit comical miscommunication and whose “unknowing disagreement is resolved into intelligible gesture. Eccentric differences of perception are only eccentric—the accidental crossings of Walter’s and Toby’s reasonings are comic because the novel can trace the different paths by which they appear to arrive at the same point” (161). The narrator can offer his readers a vantage point from which the characters’ differences can be understood and all deadlocks resolved: “It is [the] implied reader with whom *Tristram Shandy* establishes its sociality, a reader privileged to look down on the possibilities of misinterpretation which the novel invokes” (161).

Consequently, all instances of miscommunication are, in fact, examples of a different, more profound form of communication. In Sterne’s book, sociability is portrayed as a crucial moral objective, underscored by his use of satire and wit. His *lex inversa*, which involves the reversal of wrong and tyrannical stances, ideas, worlds, and conceptions, serves as a means of restoring the proper, natural order that has been inverted over time by “grave people”.

Conclusion: wit as part of humour (by way of paradox)

Returning to the point from which we began, the *hysteron proteron* of the “Author’s Preface”, Sterne’s defence of the sincere seriousness of his literary intentions confirms what we have seen so far about his being witty in an extraordinary way. This intention finds

²⁴ Sterne uses this expression, speaking of Eden, in Sermon 22, “The History of Jacob” (*Sermons, The Text* 212).

a propitious occasion in the Preface itself, even if or because it is cleverly postponed. By defending the wit of the book in a witty and seemingly improper tone, Sterne establishes the true seriousness and wisdom of his work in contrast to the false severity of the grave folks.

Perhaps mocking Locke's occasional use of metaphorical language to express purely denotative thoughts (see his metaphors of the mind as a white paper, probability as twilight or o consciousness as the Lord's candle, for example), the "Author's Preface" demonstrates a remarkable though odd congruence between thought and expression. As a theoretical synthesis, or synecdoche, of *Tristram Shandy*, the Preface can be considered a humorous analogue of propriety. Its light-hearted and seemingly immoral tone reveals a moral tension towards propriety as a social obligation.

"The Author's Preface" presents a topsy-turvy world that, in its apparent disorder, reveals itself as truly "straight" and even as the best of all possible worlds, a world that, in its funny and incomplete ways, shows nature "in her gayest humour". Tristram illustrates the necessity of harmony between wit and judgment with the comical example of the chair and its knobs. The two knobs on the chair represent wit and judgment and are the highest and most important part of its frame, just as wit and judgment are of human faculty. Removing one of the knobs would disrupt symmetry, harmony, and balance, that is, true judgment. In fact, the presence of only one of the knobs, standing for judgment, would only be a constant reminder of the absence of the other knob, wit, with no different result than an imbalance of judgment itself:²⁵

Will you give me leave to illustrate this affair of wit and judgment, by the two knobs on the top of the back of it [...]

—Here stands *wit*,—and there stands *judgment*, close beside it, just like the two knobs I'm speaking of, upon the back of this self-same chair on which I am sitting.

—You see, they are the highest and most ornamental parts of its *frame*,—as wit and judgment are of *ours*,—and like them too, indubitably both made and fitted to go together, in order as we say in all such cases of duplicated embellishments,—*to answer one another*. [...]—nay, lay your hands upon your hearts, and answer this plain question, Whether this one single knob which now stands here like a blockhead by itself, can serve any purpose upon earth, but to put one in mind of the want of the other;—and let me further ask, in case the chair was your own, if you would not in your consciences think, rather than be as it is, that it would be ten times better without any knob at all (*TS*, III, xx, 235-36).

The mock imagery of the two knobs is reflected in the more classical ideal of the light of truth. Shaftesbury said: "Truth, 'tis supposed, may bear all Lights [...] and one of those principal Lights is Ridicule itself" (30). In turn, Tristram states: "That of these two luminaries, so much of their irradiations are suffered from time to time to shine down upon

²⁵ This final section partly revises Gregori, *Il wit nel 'Tristram Shandy'* 27-40.

us; as he, whose infinite wisdom which dispenses everything in exact weight and measure, knows will just serve to light us on our way in this night of our obscurity” (*TS*, III, xx, 232). In this way, Tristram expresses the moral foundation of harmony, proportion, balance, and symmetry in a dual manner, simultaneously comical and earnest. Although seemingly absent in the “Author’s Preface”, as in the entirety of *Tristram Shandy*, that moral foundation unfolds through a comical analogue of serious propriety. The comical harmony of wit and judgment also refers to the seriocomic social harmony writing must aspire to, despite all the sceptical pains provoked by the misunderstandings, the lack of communication between characters, and even Tristram’s isolation from which his writing originates.

The witty tone of “The Author’s Preface” deliberately distances itself from the “gravity” and hypocrisy of the pedantic fools, the “Anti-Shandean, and thrice able critics, and fellow-labourers”, the “most subtle statesmen and discreet doctors [...] renowned for gravity and wisdom”, who signed the “Magna Charta of stupidity” (*TS*, III, xx, 228 and 238). It serves as a rejection of their tyrannical and dogmatic impositions and aligns with those who appreciate wit and are provided with “Shandean humour”. Tristram affirms: “I have no abhorrence whatever, nor do I detest and abjure either great wigs or long beards—any further than when I see they are bespoke and let grow on purpose to carry on this self-same imposture—for any purpose—peace be with them;—mark only—I write not for them” (*TS*, III, xx, 238). *Tristram Shandy*’s humour, in all its meanings and declensions, is not written for them. It is written for those of us who can appreciate a satire that is witty, humorous, funny, and serious at the same time and who believe in humanity, sympathetic feelings, sociability, and, above all, freedom.

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