

«LIKE A JERKIN, AND A JERKIN’S LINING»: BODY, MIND, SARTORIAL METAPHORS, AND SEXUAL IMAGERY IN STERNE’S «TRISTRAM SHANDY»

ABSTRACT

Il saggio studia il rapporto fra corpo, mente e spirito in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, di Laurence Sterne (1759-1767). Muovendo da una famosa definizione, contenuta nel terzo volume del romanzo, di questo rapporto nei termini “sartoriali” della relazione fra un “panciotto” e la sua “fodera”, il saggio sviluppa un’analisi delle metafore corporee nei termini di oggetti di vestiario e in quanto ambigui giochi di parole e doppi sensi a sfondo sessuale. Secondo Sterne, nonostante le implicazioni stoiche della succitata analogia e alcuni richiami allo Stoicismo già contenuti nell’epigrafe tratta da Epitteto, il rapporto corpo-mente-spirito è di tipo corporeo. Il rapporto è tuttavia espresso in termini ambigui: di trasformazione corporea dell’anima e di spiritualizzazione del corpo. L’ambiguità è forse superata dalla stessa scrittura che si incarica di dar corpo e anima ai desideri e ai bisogni del narratore e in generale dell’uomo.

The article analyses the relationship between body, mind and soul in Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767). Starting from a famous “sartorial” metaphor, in the third book of the novel, according to which the body-mind relationship is akin to that of a jerkin and its lining, the article deals with the metaphors of the body as garments, which allude to human sexual sphere through puns and double-entendres. Notwithstanding the reference to Stoic doctrines contained in the above-mentioned metaphor and elsewhere in the novel, as for instance in the motto from Epictetus placed as an epigraph at its beginning, the relationship between the human being and his/her soul is often expressed in corporeal terms. This relationship, however, is communicated in ambiguous ways: both as the embodiment of the soul and as the spiritual elevation of the body. Perhaps this ambiguity is conquered by Sterne’s very writing that gives body *and* soul to man’s desires and needs.

In a famous tirade against the critics of *The Monthly Review*, Laurence Sterne compares the relationship between the mind and the body to one between a jacket and its inside cover:

A Man’s body and his mind, with the utmost reverence to both I speak it, are exactly like a jerkin, and a jerkin’s lining;—rumple the one—you rumple the other. There is one certain exception however in this case, and that is, when you are so fortunate a fellow, as to have had your jerkin made of a gum-taffeta, and the body-lining to it, of a sarcenet or thin Persian (III, iv, p. 189).¹

¹ Quotations from the *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* will be given in brackets, with the indication of volume, chapter and page(s) from the *Florida Edition of The Works of Laurence Sterne*, vol. 1-2: *Tristram Shandy: The Text*, ed. by Melvin New - Joan New, and vol. 3: *The Notes*, ed. by Melvin New - Richard A. Davies - W.G. Day, Gainesville, Florida University

The metaphor of the body and mind as a jerkin and its lining alludes to Jonathan Swift's sartorial definition of man as a micro-coat, in his *Tale of a Tub*: «What is Man himself but a *Micro-Coat*, or rather a compleat Suit of cloaths with all its Trimmings?» (SWIFT 2010, pp. 49-50; see STERNE 1978, vol. 3, p. 207). Swift's definition is a travesty of the Cambridge Platonists' idea of man as a microcosm: according to his satirical interpretation, man is a smaller image of God, and since God's word has become, in his allegory, a garment that can be trimmed and refashioned according to one's wishes, the august doctrine of the world-harmony can be deformed into its parody, which is meant to symbolise the wrong tenets of atomist, atheist, and various materialist thinkers and sects (STARKMAN 1950, pp. 57-60; see HARTH 1961 and OLSON 1983).

While we must take into account that with the word "jerkin" Sterne refers to «his *body of works*, the Volumes the monthly Reviewers have attacked every which way» (CHIBKA 2016, p. 126), the metaphor also indicates a physical quality of Sterne as author, and of his narrator and characters by extension, as «men clothed with bodies, and governed by our imaginations» (V, VII, p. 432). The sartorial metaphor is used to show the narrator and his characters' «never-ending struggles to shield themselves from external evils» (NORTON 2006, p. 409): as a consequence, the critics' condemnation of his works should not affect Sterne's peace of mind; the strictures on the novel should not impact on Tristram's life as narrator; and the blows to the characters' wishes and aspirations should not deprive them of their tranquillity and steadfastness in pursuing their aspirations.

This *Shandean* version of the Stoic doctrine of *apatheia*, the freeing oneself from the passions and achieving a state of inner peace and happiness, tallies with Epictetus's motto placed as an epigraph to the first volume of *Tristram Shandy*: «Men are disturbed, not by Things, but by the Principles and Notions, which they form concerning Things». In the jerkin passage, the narrator provides a list of ancient and modern Stoic philosophers who maintained that the mind would subsist unaltered by the discomforts in the body, including

a score and a half of good honest, unthinking, Shandean people as ever lived [who] pretended that their jerkins were made after this fashion,—you might have rumbled and crumpled, and doubled and creased, and fretted and fridged the outsides of them all to pieces;—in short, you might have played the very devil with them, and at the same time, not one of the insides of 'em would have been one button the worse, for all you had done to them.

Tristram too believes that he can follow the Stoic doctrine of the separation of mind and body:

I believe in my conscience that mine is made up somewhat after this sort:—for never poor jerkin has been tickled off, at such a rate as it has been these last nine months together,—and yet I declare the lining to it,—as far as I am a judge of the matter, it is not a three-penny piece the worse;—pell mell, helter skelter, ding dong, cut and thrust, back stroke and fore stroke, side way and long way, have they been trimming it for me:—had there been the least gumminess in my lining,—by heaven! it had all of it long ago been fray'd and fretted to a thread (III, IV, pp. 189-90).

All these «good honest, unthinking, Shandean people» seem to partake of the same spirit according to which a good balance in the body's constituent parts is good for man's health: «True *Shandeism*, think what you will against it, 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, p. 401). Yet, Tristram's catalogue of Stoic philosophers is incomplete and incorrect (see STERNE 1978, vol. 3, p. 208) and, notwithstanding Epictetus's motto and Tristram's conviction, Stoicism is not the answer to the troubles that distress the characters in *Tristram Shandy*. Abandoning the body in favour of a purely intellectual life cannot solve man's troubles, according to Sterne: the body needs the mind as much as the mind needs the body – as much as Captain Toby Shandy needs Corporal Trim, and vice versa: captain and corporal, *caput* and *corpus* (ROTHSTEIN 1975, p. 79).

In his Sermon XLIII, on the “efficacy of prayers”, Sterne condemns the ideas according to which the inner man can be separated from the outward man:

I cannot help here taking notice of the doctrine of those who would resolve all devotion into the inner man, and think that there is nothing more requisite to express our reverence to God, but purity and integrity of heart,—unaccompanied either with words or actions.—To this opinion it may be justly answered,—that, in the present state we are in, we find such a strong sympathy and union between our souls and bodies, that the one cannot be touched or sensibly affected, without producing some corresponding emotion in the other [...] We are not angels, but men cloathed with bodies, and, in some measure, governed by our imaginations, that we have need of all these external helps which nature has made the interpreters of our thoughts (STERNE 1978, vol. 4, pp. 402-403).

The unity of the inward being and its external appearance and conduct was commonplace among the Latitudinarians (STERNE 1978, vol. 5, p. 433-6). John Tillotson, for instance, believed that man's happiness derives from both the inward peace of the soul and the satisfaction of bodily desires, as well as the easing of outward care. However, as Tillotson and other Church of England preachers claimed, man's body should gain the very composure the soul must possess: «To be happy is not only to be freed from the pains and diseases of the body, but from anxiety and vexation of the spirit: not only to enjoy the pleasures of the sense, but peace of conscience, and tranquillity of mind» (see DAL SANTO 2015, p. 76).² The interconnection of soul and body «is not in any way the granting of license to bodily appetites», New observes (STERNE 1978, vol. 5, p. 434). In fact, even in his raunchiest pages Sterne has no eudemonism in mind.³ If human beings are «cloathed with bodies», it does not follow that the body prevails over the soul, but only that body and soul must depend upon one another in a virtuous way: «The mind will shine through the veil of flesh which covers it, and naturally express its religious dispositions; and, if it possesses the power of godliness,—will have the external form of it too» (STERNE 1978, vol. 4, p. 407).

² On the relationship between Latitudinarianism and Stoicism, see MÜLLER 2009, pp. 131-133.

³ See his Sermon *Inquiry after Happiness* (STERNE 1978, vol. 4, pp. 4-6).

Although Sterne's sermons suggest that there is no room for an independent mind, it still may be difficult for a writer to access it because it is «wrapped up here in a dark covering of uncrystallized flesh and blood» (I, XXIII, p. 83; see TUNSALL 2016, p. 206). Commenting on this illustration of the body as an impenetrable screen, some scholars are convinced that *Tristram Shandy* stands «as a marvelously rich and detailed embodiment of the Cartesian view –mediated by Locke– that the mind is a mysterious, fugitive, invisible substance»; and that in Sterne «the sense of duality is in one respect stronger [...] than in Descartes » (NUTTALL 1974, p. 83). *Tristram Shandy*, in this interpretation, would eventually celebrate the solipsistic triumph of the dis-embodied mind. Yet, however much Tristram (and Walter before him) «trumpets the Stoics», Sterne «cannot believe that mind can declare unilateral independence from the body» (PORTER 2003, p. 298). The novel makes so many references to the body that «scarcely a word or an image [...] can be sustained at a purely intellectual level» and «everything tends eventually towards a bodily and sexual inference [...] The soul subsides to the mind, the mind to the body, the body to its lowest 'end'» (MCMMASTER 2004, p. 36; see WALSH 2002, p. 91). In turn, the lowest ends, if properly managed, are conducive to the body, the mind, and the soul. As Tristram puts it, «REASON is, half of it, SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoction» (VII, XIII, p. 593).

Even the most abstract notions are made into corporeal metaphors and become the body of the text in *Tristram Shandy*, as Sigurd Burckhardt points out with reference to Sterne's obsession with Newton's elusive law of gravity: in *Tristram Shandy*, gravity is the heaviness of corporeal beings, including loose sash windows falling onto genitals and procuring accidental circumcisions (BURCKHARDT 1961).⁴ Sterne puns likewise in his sartorial metaphors, evoking ambiguous buttons and button-holes, green gowns, old hats, hooks and eyes, Montero caps, red plush breeches, ramallie wigs, and so on. In most cases they have sub-meanings whose «bawdiness is blatant» (NEW 2011, p. 83). Even the word “jerkin” is not immune from such a ribald ambiguity, as it resonates with the late seventeenth-century vulgar connotation of “jerking” (“to copulate with”; see WILLIAMS 1994, under “jerk”).

This sartorial imagery is central in the novel, reaching its climax in the discussion between Walter Shandy and his wife Elizabeth about putting their son into breeches that recapitulates the several allusions to breeches, trousers and other garments as “vexatious” handicaps (VI, XVIII-XIX, pp. 526-33; see LAVOIE 2015). One's body and mind are vexatious to one another, and in the above-quoted passage, the “gum-taffeta” jerkin alludes to the phrase “to fret like gum taffeta” (STERNE 1978, vol. 3, p. 207), *i.e.* like gummed fabrics that were easily frayed. The same instance of silk-like fragility (alluded to by the soft “saracenet” of the lining) seems to affect *Tristram Shandy*'s hero and the other characters who frequently “fret and fume”, *i.e.* are ill at ease with the world and themselves, and break down.

For instance, in the *Author's Preface*, Tristram «fret[s] and fume[s]» about being

⁴ Among the many studies on Sterne's treatment of the body stand out LANDA 1963; GROSVENOR MYER 1984; ALLEN 1985; HOULIHAN FLYNN 1990; PORTER 2003; and particular, MCMMASTER 2004.

ever able to explain the need to keep a balance between wit and judgment against the “agelastic” idea that wit must disappear (III, xx, pp. 228-230). Toby too frets at his own inability to understand the science of ballistics and the complex systems of fortifications with which he would like to soothe his own dejected condition. In fact, he vexes himself and his hearers with half-moons, ravelins, counterscarps, dykes, ditches, and other puzzling terms of fortification. He cannot devise a method to cure his own disease; on the contrary, he exacerbates it:

[Toby] fretted and fumed inwardly [...] and these little and hourly vexations, which may seem trifling and of no account to the man who has not read *Hippocrates*, yet, whoever has read *Hippocrates*, or Dr. *James Mackenzie*, and has considered well the effects which the passions and affections of the mind have upon the digestion,—(Why not of a wound as well as of a dinner?)—may easily conceive what sharp paroxysms and exacerbations of his wound my uncle Toby must have undergone upon that score only (II, I, p. 95).

Walter teases himself and his wife as well with the «cursed experience» of traveling to London on the false assumption of Elizabeth's pregnancy:

he would do nothing but syllogize within himself for a stage or two together, How far the cause of all these vexations might, or might not, have arisen out of himself. In short, he had so many little subjects of disquietude springing out of this one affair, all fretting successively in his mind as they rose up in it, that my mother, whatever was her journey up, had but an uneasy journey of it down.—In a word, as she complained to my uncle *Toby*, he would have tired out the patience of any flesh alive (II, xvi, pp. 48-49).

Both Walter and Toby suffer from not being able to conquer the “vexations” that oppress them. Walter has a disease in the mind affecting his body and corporeal existence; Toby a disease in the body acting on his existential life and disposition.

As we have seen, his father's and uncle's torments afflict Tristram too, whose life is «a train of vexatious disappointments» (I, xv, p. 47), as he admits, picking the phrase from one of Yorick's (*i.e.*, Sterne's) sermons, *Job's Account of the Shortness and Troubles of Life, Considered*. However, while in the sermon Sterne refers to man's «vanity and vexation of spirit» as the existential condition of despair addressed by *Ecclesiastes*, in the novel his vexations proceed from the working of the mind's obsessions with the body: in the novel, in fact, a man's depression is tantamount to the depression of his “nose”: «Sport of small accidents, *Tristram Shandy!* that thou art, and ever will be! had that trial been made for thee, and it was fifty to one but it had,—thy affairs had not been so depress'd—(at least by the depression of thy nose) as they have been» (III, viii, p. 195). Tristram's disappointments depend on «the mere loss, or compression, of this one single member», his «nose», doomed to be «squeeze'd as flat to [his] face, as if the destinies had actually spun [him] without one» (I, xv, p. 46).

In *Tristram Shandy*, mind and body often intersect in that “member”. In late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts of the mind-body relationship, there is sometimes a short step from the head to the groin that Sterne takes cheerfully. The Scriblerians had already taken full advantage of a comic comparison between Descartes's pineal gland and male genitalia. In *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, *e.g.*, they

poke fun at the Freethinkers and, in general, at all materialist reductionism by declaring that man's testicles are the seat of the soul (KERBY-MILLER 1950, pp. 158 and 280 ff.). Sterne uses a similarly satirical soul-body comparison in his own special way, both with a Scriblerian mockery of the natural philosophers' speculations and with much gusto for the bonanza of wit and humour they can provide.

Walter lucubrates on the seat of the soul and, after having discarded Descartes' theory of the pineal gland, mentions «the very thin, subtle and very fragrant juice which Coglionissimo [big testicle] Borri, the great Milaneze physician, affirms, in a letter to Bartholine, to have discovered in the cellulæ of the occipital parts of the cerebellum» (II, xxix, p. 174). This is a comic version of the brain-genitalia relationship that occupied so much Martinus Scriblerus's studies. As Raymond Stephanson says, «[h]ilariously blurring the distinction between semen and neurospinal fluid, Sterne implies that great thoughts about the brain—indeed, the soul itself—might come from the personified testicles of the good Italian doctor» (Stephanson 2008, p. 43). However, Walter's Stoicism prevails and he eventually rejects the supposition that the fluid of the mind may correspond to the fluids produced by the testicles:

my father could never subscribe to it by any means; the very idea of so noble so refined, so immaterial, and so exalted a being as the *Anima*, or even the *Animus*, taking up her residence, and sitting dabbling, like a tad-pole, all day long, both summer and winter, in a puddle,—or in a liquid of any kind, how thick or thin soever, he would say, shock'd his imagination (II, xix, p. 174).

Thus Walter embraces the more modern theory of the «chief sensorium» located near «the cerebellum,—or rather some--where about the *medulla oblongata*», where «all the minute nerves from all the organs of the seven senses concentrated, like streets and winding alleys, into a square». The notes in the *Florida Edition* of Sterne's works refer to the several entries in Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopædia* that Sterne might have consulted (STERNE 1978, vol. 3, pp. 194-196). Through Chambers' digest, Sterne appears to have absorbed some of the most current neurological theories of the age, as can be found, for instance, in Thomas Willis' studies of the anatomy of the brain. Various interpretations of the structure and functioning of the body intersect in that passage: the iatromechanic thought that considered the body as a machine; the old Hippocratic theories, as found in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and in the Menippean satire of the Scriblerians; the “nervous” theories as introduced by Willis (and involuntarily parodied by Walter);⁵ and the modern analysis of sympathy and shared compassion based on Newton's vibrationism. Among the medical works that Sterne mention, as Judith Hawley observes, there is James Mackenzie's *History of Health, and the Art of Preserving It* (1758), an important specimen of how eighteenth-century physicians and natural philosophers were moving away from a merely

⁵ Willis's neuro-anatomy was made popular by George Cheyne's *The English Malady* (1733), and was very influential in transforming the science of the mind from the Cartesian dualism of the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* to the «ethic of nervous sensibility [that] would flourish in the high Enlightenment» (ROUSSEAU 2004, p. 158). Willis believed that the impulses travel through a «nervous juice, being channeled from the brain and cerebellum into the medullary appendix [...] then carried outward, gently wending its way into every part of the nervous kind, and irrigating the whole of the nervous system» (see WALLACE 2003, p. 78; see SMITH *et al.* 2012, pp. 135-139).

mechanical representation of the body and understood it in its interaction with the brain as the recipient of inner passions and external stimuli (HAWLEY 2009, p. 42).⁶

Tristram Shandy can be seen indeed as a sort of neuro-physiological version of the Latitudinarian promotion of the balance between the “head” and the “heart”, the mind and bodily passions (MÜLLER 2009, pp. 281-325). Walter’s discussion on “radical heat” and “radical moisture”, odd though it may seem, reminds the reader of the necessity of that harmonious relation between the parts of the bodily frame that the members of his family, including himself, seem to have lost:

O Blessed health! cried my father, making an exclamation, as he turned over the leaves to the next chapter,—thou art above all gold and treasure; ‘tis thou who enlargest the soul,—and openest all it’s powers to receive instruction and to relish virtue.—He that has thee, has little more to wish for;—and he that is so wretched as to want thee,—wants every thing with thee [...] “The whole secret of health depending upon the due contention for mastery betwixt the radical heat and the radical moisture” (V, xxxiii, p. 471).

Walter, always attracted by fluidist theories, goes on to explain: «Now the radical moisture is [...] an oily and balsamous substance; for the fat and tallow, as also the phlegm or watery parts are cold; whereas the oily and balsamous parts are of a lively heat and spirit, which accounts for the observation of *Aristotle*, “*Quod omne animal post coitum est triste*”» (V, xxxvi, p. 475). Here we can notice again the conjunction of bodily harmony and sexuality, though contradicted by Walter’s aversion to the procreative act.

The «whole secret of health», which Toby has lost not so much because of his wound in his groin but because of his *hobby-horse*, and which Walter seems not to be able to properly comprehend, is also the goal of the narrator, whose harmony was scattered away at his birth and in the following stages of his childhood. It is this harmony that Tristram wants to reclaim from the very sexual act from which he originated, by way of the sexual imagery which he makes such conspicuous use of in the novel. A novel which is circumscribed within the perimeter of a human copulation at its beginning and a bovine one at the end, and engages in numberless references to sexual intercourse, has perforce the bodily functions in its centre, from which the spiritual aspects of being irradiate too (see HARRIS 2009, pp. 111-114). It is Sterne’s textual exercise, his moving through his many metaphors and allusions, from the literal to the metaphoric and vice versa, that reconciles and unites the more mechanical qualities of the body and the more organic aspects of the mind, preserving both the jerkin and its lining from being rumpled and crumpled by the *damnatio memoriae*, the curse on the body and mind that death imparts on man and that the regenerative power of writing tries to defeat.

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⁶ Hawley cites the following passages in which Sterne alludes to Mackenzie: I, x; I, xx; II, I; II, III; II, xvii; II, xix; IV, xxxi; V, xxxiii-xxxv; IX, I.

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