TRISTRAM SHANDY AND THE NEW SCIENCE
by Patrizia Nerozzi

"Now, of all things in the world, I understand the least of mechanism—I have neither genius, or taste, or fancy—and have a brain so entirely unapt for everything of that kind, that I solemnly declare I was never yet able to comprehend the principles of motion of a squirrel cage, or a common knife-grinder’s wheel—tho’ I have many an hour of my life look’d up with great devotion at the one—and stood up with as much patience as any christian ever could do, at the other—"

In volume VII chapter XXXI of Tristram Shandy an abrupt self declaration denies the protagonist any capacity to understand even the simplest mechanical principles involved in humble, domestic appliances such as a squirrel cage or a knife-grinder, which are observed by Tristram with devoted - if hopeless - reverence. The scene possibly alludes to that diffused practice of "drawing room" experiments, such as those celebrated in the same years by Wright of Derby in "The Orrery" (1766) or in "Experiment with an Air-Pump" (1768), where a conversation piece portrays a circle of friends and family members fascinated, each in his/her own way, by the marvels of scientific investigation. The setting of the whole scene, with characters performing as on a theatrical stage, implies the presence of a beholder, at the same time dialogically involved in the shared context of science and sensibility.

The reference to the popularization of science, typical of the mid years of 18th century England, comes immediately to mind together with the ironic implication. But what lies underneath it? Does the protagonist of this unique Bildungsroman, want to proclaim his "anti-modernity" or just his personal aversion to new mechanical science or again, to warn the reader against the limits and limitations of a mechanistic idea of the world?

On May 23rd 1759, offering the first two volumes of Tristram Shandy to Robert Dodsley for publication, Sterne writes: "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." Being an investigation into the nature of the new fiction and the whole process of learning, "the most typical novel of world literature", according to the well known definition of Viktor Shklovsky, absorbs, and kaleidoscopically reflects and refracts the contemporary cultural context. Right from its opening pages we note that the still dominant view of the physical world, conceived as a vast machine, maintains a central place in the story (though moving through different roles and appearances), while Locke’s pervasive influence unequivocally, if sometimes obliquely, seems to support and keep together the imaginative framework of the narrative discourse.

In his struggle to capture life’s accidents in their uniqueness and variety and fix them into meaningful autobiographical writing, Tristram declares himself obsessed by tracing back the origins of events, seeking to explore the objective cause of unpredictable effects. But in his uneven race against time (while he is writing his autobiography, his life goes inexorably on; the more he lives, the more he will have to write) he falls prey to the inextricable network of experience. In the mean time, "mechaniks", the science of forces and their effects, scatters the narrative stage of the text with clocks, engines, hinges, wheels, various machinery which is present or alluded to as symbols, metaphors, interpreting devices.

The best way for the exact measurement of time was a much debated question in the spirit of the age and at the opening of the novel, we find the "begetting" of the narrator/ protagonist emblematically determined by his father’s custom of winding up the clock on the first Sunday night of every month punctually linked with the fulfilment of his marital duties so that "… from an unhappy association of ideas… my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up,— but the thought of some
other things unavoidably popped into her head— & vice versa: Which strange combination of ideas, the sagacious Locke, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all other sources of prejudice whatsoever."

(Vol.I ch.IV) With a direct parody of the accepted conventions of fictional autobiography, Sterne seems to evoke the optimistic Enlightenment project of writing objective accounts to provide useful knowledge for public consumption, re-opening the whole question of narrative realism, which is the core of the contemporary critical discussion on the relationship of art and life. Hence his story must begin at the very beginning, ab ovo, with the conception of the human embryo of the protagonist/narrator. But: "Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock? -Good G-! cried my father making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time,- Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?" (Vol.I ch.I). A living example, if ever there was one, of the fatal anachronism between the rigid, linear progression of time marked by the sequence of events and the elusive, unpredictable measure of individual time. Born under the sign of the family clock and the ominous "interruption", which had "frightened" the sperm, Tristram is given a destiny largely determined by inadequate mechanisms, tools which either do not work properly (the sash window which is the cause of Tristram’s near-emasculation) or are badly used (the forceps which break Tristram’s nose during his laborious birth).

Locke frequently reminds us that clocks owe their particular functions to their actual, perceptible mechanical structure which provides an explanatory model of an observable and ready-to-measure material reality. But in Tristram Shandy Locke’s optimism in an understandable and therefore controllable world seems doomed to failure, undermined by a narrative universe dominated by unforeseen twists and turns which annul any individual attempt to impose a systematic order on contingent reality. So that the mutability of life makes characters look for stable meaning on the margins of experience, as if taken by a centripetal urge into the idiosyncratic pursuit of a self-characterising hobby. An intelligible, controllable pattern can only work in the manic realm of the "hobbyhorse" where it is possible to fully enjoy personal identity. Most specifically, it lies in the miniature battlefields constructed by Uncle Toby and Trim where the elaborate enactment of military strategy proves to be the closest match of system to existence. But again it is a mechanism which shows its instability: the model drawbridge, so carefully projected by the two indefatigable military strategists collapses.

Characters seem desperately in need of affirming their individuality, against the backdrop of the chaos of existence. This may possibly reflect "the modern infatuation with singularity… in the name of the new science", a way of understanding selfhood, escaping from the avenues of associations, continually modified by circumstance and experience. Life cannot be reduced to geometry as the Lagado projectors in Gulliver’s Travels had already amply and unequivocally demonstrated. According to Locke: "… personality extends it self beyond present Existence to what is past, only by consciousness" which is defined as the "totality of the impressions, thoughts, and feelings, which make up a person’s conscious being". But consciousness is intermittent and fragmented, even more so after the introspective turn given by Shaftesbury to Locke’s associationist empiricism. Tristram’s experience – and thoughts as well- form a net of inextricably related facts only in his consciousness but resist any attempt to be ordered into a logical sequence. How can the writer and the reader, even if linked in a bond of complicity, mutually conceptualise and communicate chaos?

A leitmotiv of the story is tuned to the contrast between abstract theory and individual opinion on each specific question. Walter Shandy is the character who epitomizes this unsolved and unsolvable conflict; the self-defined natural philosopher (Vol.I ch.III), is a butt to the vanity of dogmatizing, a prey to "his obsession with allegories, metaphors, patterns and schemes". A peremptory and logorrheic savant who claims the protection of Locke (Vol.I ch. IV), he speaks his anxiety to master universal knowledge in a Lockean idiom stretched to absurdity. So much so that his intellectual authority is dissipated not only by his seeing everything "through the spectacles of books" (Doctor Johnson on Milton) but by transforming the real into words. Experience cannot be constrained into a book, and his effort to write an educational treatise for his son, the Tristrapaedia, proves useless, baffled as he is by the passing of time: while absorbed in his book, Tristram grows up without an education. In the attempt to investigate, rationalise and codify, he falls into the solipsistic vertigo of his ever rewarding hobby-horse, his "learned", "philosophical" way of living experience, becoming totally unable not only to intervene even in the minutiae of reality - a door hinge in need of repair or the Sternes’ coat of arms in need of resetting - but also to feel the premature loss of his elder son.
In a letter to Dr John Eustace (February 9th 1768) Sterne writes: "(Tristram Shandy has) more handles than one... every one will take the handle which suits his convenience". Imagining his novel as a house with many different rooms among which the reader can choose where to enter, or, if we want to risk the definition, as a hyper-novel ante litteram, Sterne responds to the 18th century interest in compendiums, treatises, dictionaries, encyclopaedias with a play on intertextuality which has no parallel in the history of the novel. Questions of science, medicine, law, theology, astronomy find their place in digressions which explore the capacity of the novel as a versatile means of communication, able to contain within itself different kinds of discourse, incorporating scientific debates, legal acts, a marriage contract (where Mrs Shandy is given the right to bear her children in London), theological controversies (like that on the possibility of christening a baby before its birth), a real sermon, an excommunication. But life’s accidents cannot be reduced to laws and their uniqueness interpreted according to fixed rules; hence parody derives from the gap between the claimed seriousness of the exhibited documentation and the context in which it is introduced.

Mechanical philosophy or mechanical science, if you like, looks as if woven into the linguistic and figural texture of the novel, which portrays human beings and social aggregations in terms of machinery:

"Though man is of all others the most curious vehicle, said my father, yet at the same time 'tis of so slight a frame and so totteringly put together, that the sudden jerks and hard jostlings it unavoidably meets with in this rugged journey, would overset and tear it to pieces a dozen times a day—was it not, brother Toby, that there is a secret spring within us— Which spring, said my uncle Toby I take to be Religion." (Vol.IV ch.VIII) The Shandy family on the other hand can be considered "a simple machine" because it consists only "of a few wheels":

"Though in one sense, our family was certainly a simple machine, as it consisted of a few wheels; yet there was thus much to be said for it, that these wheels were set in motion by so many different springs, and acted one upon the other from such a variety of strange principles and impulses,—that though it was a simple machine, it had all the honour and advantages of a complex one,—and a number of as odd movements within it, as ever were beheld in the inside of a Dutch silk-mill." (Vol.V ch.VI)

"...Speaking of my book as a machine" (Vol.VII ch.I): in the imaginative world of Tristram Shandy, the background of the characters’ actions is crowded with inanimate details such as hinges, doorknobs, knots, all in some way related to the operating function of objects. Put under the hyper-realistic effect of a magnifying glass, they seem to frame the eccentric, "sentimental" subjectivity of man’s behaviour.

"In its diverse and contested forms, the mechanical philosophy achieved towering prestige in the early Enlightenment," Roy Porter writes, "and not just in the physical sciences. ‘Clockwork’ thinking, for example, invaded physiology and medicine; ‘iatromechanism’, advanced among others by the Scottish physicians Archibald Pitcairne and George Cheyne, casts the human body as a system of pulleys, springs and levers, pipes and vessels, its fluids being governed by the laws of hydraulics”. Thus the human body can be represented as a system of nerves set into motion by the brain, even though characters are projected as individuals continuously modified by external observation, opening up new aesthetic perspectives. In Tristam Shandy this is focused by the description of the characters’ explicitly mechanical movements, the gestures of puppets fixed by theatrical directions which not only recall Hogarth’s plates of the different parts of the body in The Analysis of Beauty and Garrick’s gesture–ridden performances but also the disassembled members of that typical 18th century invention, the automaton. To see this let’s spy on the love manoeuvres of Uncle Toby and Widow Wadman: "...so that when an attack was resolved upon, Mrs. Wadman had nothing more to do, when she had got advanced to the door of the sentry-box, but to extend her right hand; and edging in her left foot at the same moment, to take hold of the map or plan, or whatever it was, and with out-stretched neck meeting it half way, —to advance it towards her... By bringing up her forefinger parallel (as before) to my uncle Toby’s – it unavoidably brought the thumb into action – and the forefinger and thumb being once engaged, as naturally brought in the whole hand... with the gentlest pushings, protrusions, and equivocal compressions, that a hand to be removed is capable of receiving.” (Vol.VIII ch.XVI)

The reader finds himself/herself involved in a never-exhausted process inside Sterne’s philosophy of knowledge, continuously wavering in the Lockean battle between wit, the faculty of connecting distant things, and judgement, the rational faculty of discerning things, wandering in the "history-book... of what passes in a man’s own mind" (Sterne’s definition of Locke’s Essay). Is science able to control the "busy and boundless fancy of man" (Locke)? The elaborate richness of the narrative pattern, overloaded by short and long digressions, images, lists of analogies can suddenly weave a revealing "figure in the
carpet”. The “finding out the longitude” which was an epic scientific quest in the 18th century, solved by John Harrison, a Yorkshire clockmaker, who wanted to build the perfect time keeper, is significantly mentioned in connection with birth (Vol.VIII ch.XXXIII).7

So the debate, or to use a more Shandean word, the conversation between two sets of contrasting, antithetical ideas is ever present throughout the text: universal meaning/individual understanding; judgement/wit; figural language/metonymic representation; strategy of planning/unpredictability of events; writing/living. But writing and living form that connection which enables us to escape from death and time: "...as long as I live or write (which in my case means the same thing)…” (Vol.III ch.V) "—Ask my pen,—it governs me,—I govern not it” (Vol.VI ch.VI)

As George Poulet writes: "Le roman de Tristram Shandy est emblématiquement représenté par le moulinet compliqué qu’y décrit la canne d’un des personnages, moulinet que Sterne a graphiquement reproduit dans l’un des chapitres du roman… Le moulinet est une représentation de la pensée libre… La ligne de la beauté est donc aussi la ligne de la liberté; en tout cas, de cette liberté qui consiste à suivre son caprice, à adopter les itinéraires changeants que la fantaisie propose à l’esprit. Mais cette liberté de spontanéité est elle-même démentie secrètement par un principe de nécessité qui la domine… La sinuosité de ma pensée dépend des conditions extérieures où je me trouve, des expériences sensibles… qui la contrait insidieusement, par la continuité des points communs, à passer d’une idée à l’autre, comme on passe d’une courbe concave à une courbe convexe au point de tangence”.

This interaction of writing and visualizing, employing different communication media takes us back to science and on to new technologies. To slot living into writing Sterne expands the concept of writing to include other forms of visual artistry and communication, prefiguring a new type of “potentiated” (Michael Joyce) narrative space. Not only typographical signs, pointing hands, asterisks, dots but also graphics, straight and sinuous lines provoke an extension of writing with postmodernist anticipations. In his urge to involve the reader he asks him to contribute with a painting of his own, from his own experience. Instead of describing Mrs Wadman the reader is left a blank page on which to draw the woman of his dreams: "To conceive this right, —call for pen and ink—here’s paper ready to your hand. —Sit down. Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you – ’tis all one to me—please but your own fancy in it" (Vol.VI ch.XXXVIII)

If the book is presented to the reader as a physical, concrete object made up of paper and printed letters and signs, the marbling of the page epitomises the maze of words where the reader is left free to find his own path in the non sequential form of writing, in the labyrinthine digressions of the story.

"And who are you? said he.- Don’t puzzle me; said I” (Vol.VII ch. XXXIII).

Notes


6 Roy Porter, cit., p. 158.
