

Mirrors in the Text: Self-reflexive Narrative in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*

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Abstract: Laurence Sterne's nine-volume work, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67), is not customarily categorized as a typical eighteenth-century novel for the reason that it bears a close resemblance to postmodernist novels, albeit it was written and published in the eighteenth century. One of the shared strands between *Tristram Shandy* and a number of postmodernist novels, among other similarities, is narrative self-reflexivity. There are numerous instances in *Tristram Shandy* that Sterne steps out of the narrative proper and directly addresses the readers and comments on the processes of writing in order to provoke readers' collaboration in the creation of meaning. Additionally, by employing textual and typographical peculiarities such as marbled and black pages, asterisks and dashes, Sterne aims to reinforce the self-reflexivity of his novel, and simultaneously defy the conventions of realistic novels. This paper is an attempt to study these instances of self-reflexivity in *Tristram Shandy's* narrative.

Key Words: *Tristram Shandy*, narrative, self-reflexivity, reader, textual manipulation.

Introduction

As the Formalists postulated, a work of verbal art exercises a series of devices; hence, it is the job of the artist to figure out and choose whether to lay his/her devices bare, or to find alibies for them, masking their arbitrariness behind a scrim of spontaneity and inevitability – to motivate the devices (Phelan & Rabinowitz, 2005, p.65). In *Tristram Shandy's* case, Sterne decides to lay bare his devices and deconstruct the narrative space between the reader and the author. This may be the reason why Jeffrey Williams finds “*Tristram Shandy* – in its foregrounding the problematics of narrative – to be an exemplary case demonstrating the reflexive tendency in and of narrative” (Williams, 2004, p.27).

Self-reflexive narrative in *Tristram Shandy* can roughly be divided into two main parts, each of which can correspondingly encompass its own subdivisions. The first part, above all, includes those parts in which Tristram reflects processes of the novel's construction, and displays the formation of chapters, pages, and narrations. Presenting the accounts of his life and the complications he is confronted in their recounting, Tristram frequently steps out of the narrative proper and explicitly depicts the act of writing.

In the second part, Tristram directly addresses the readers, making them conscious of the fact that what he is composing is merely an artefact. These instances in *Tristram Shandy*, in which Sterne invites his readers to take part in his unconventional narrative, in Roland Barthes's words, signify “the birth of the reader” (Barthes, 1977, p.148). By doing so, as Keymer writes,

“the readers’ attention is forcibly drawn to the conditions of the very performance of the act of reading, in accordance with Robert Alter’s remark that in *Tristram Shandy*, ‘an early but ultimate instance of self-reflexive fiction, the many mirrors of the novel set to catch its own operations also give us back the image of the mind in action’ ” (Keymer, 2006, p.254). Thus, Sterne’s conversations with his readers, in Patricia Waugh’s words, reflect his dependence on the reader for identity and sympathy (Waugh, 1984, p.26).

In two sections of the current study, entitled “Narrative Discomfort: Self-reflexive Commentaries on the Writing Process” and “Collaborative Reader in *Tristram Shandy*”, textual self-reflexivity in *Tristram Shandy* is analyzed. These sections try to scrutinize self-reflexive formal procedures of *Tristram Shandy* which associate it to the many postmodernist novels.

Narrative Discomfort: Self-reflexive Commentaries on the Writing Process

Self-conscious narrative in *Tristram Shandy*, as Wayne Booth writes, is an element that holds the whole book together (as cited in Özüin, 77). Sterne’s predilection for this type of narration is revealed right from the beginning when Tristram sets off to write about his life and opinions:

As my life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and, if I conjecture right, will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever,—be no less read than the *Pilgrim’s Progress* itself - - - and, in the end, prove the very thing which *Montaigne* dreaded his essays should turn out, that is, a book for a parlour-window;—I find it necessary to consult every one a little in his turn; and therefore must beg pardon for going on a little further in the same way: For which cause, right glad I am, that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on tracing every thing in it, as *Horace* says, *ab Ovo*. (Sterne, 8)

This tendency is resumed when Tristram goes a step beyond and directly discusses the process of writing his life and opinions, with the intention of reminding the readers that what they are reading is fiction:

I have undertaken, you see, to write not only my life, but my opinions also; But to know by what means this came to pass, - - - and to make that knowledge of use to you, I insist upon it that you read the two following chapters, which contain such a sketch of his life and conversation, as will carry its moral along with it. - - When this is done, if nothing stops us in our way, we will go on with the midwife. (Ibid, 22)

The more Tristram carries on writing his life accounts, the more readers gain knowledge of its unconventional narrative, and to a large extent, are forced to think about a broader issue that looms large beneath the text: the parody of conventional narrative. Through self-reflexive phenomenon that exists in *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne, writes Özüin, “parodies the minute-by-minute realism of a conventional writer” (Özüin, 2012, p.81). “Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*”,

Dennis Walder writes, “was a masculine, often salacious parody of the developing conventions of the novel in the eighteenth-century” (Walder, 2005, p.24). Perhaps the spirit of comparing the parodists of the eighteenth century is done thoroughly by no one but Harold Bloom when he writes “Sterne is a great ironist and parodist, but so are Pope and Fielding, while Swift excels even Sterne in such modes. But if all three of the great Augustans are cognitively subtle, Sterne is preternaturally subtle, to the point of being daemonic” (Bloom, 2004, p.28). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to point out that Sterne does not linger on this parodic mode, and hence goes a step further in order to encompass a satiric platform. “*Tristram Shandy*”, writes Henke, “self-reflexively satirizes the ‘rise of the novel’ and its most successful exponents, Richardson and Fielding” (cited in Huber et al., 2005, p.24). Some parts of Sterne’s satiric tone, as Christopher Fanning asserts, were subtly pointed at the print culture of his time, for he was unequivocally cognizant of the socio-economic factors that affected the print medium. Therefore, the self-reflexive phenomenon in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* “is a product of a satirical critique of print culture” (Fanning, 2003, p.383). “Eighteenth-century readers”, writes René Bosch, “found in *Tristram Shandy* ‘much good satire on the follies of life’, ‘poignant ridicule, and marks of taste and erudition’, ‘latent lessons of virtue and morality’, and ‘satire [which] is spirited, poignant, and often extremely just’ ” (René Bosch, 2007, p.23). This is a similar inclination shared between Sterne and Jonathan Swift. “Though he is perhaps the most satirical of all vitalists”, maintains Bloom, “Sterne’s final affinities seem to be with Rabelais and Blake” (Bloom, 2004, p.31).

In a similar manner to *Tristram Shandy*, in *A Tale of a Tub* (1633), which is a satiric work, Swift employs self-reflexivity. “Both narrators”, writes Christoph Henke, “Tristram and Swift’s hack, define themselves self-consciously in and through writing” (cited in Huber et al., 2005, p.25). The ongoing commentaries on the processes of writing and the creation of textual presence are among techniques that link Sterne to Pope and Swift. “Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Laurence Sterne”, accentuates Fanning, “were writers who witnessed an unprecedented expansion of print culture, and who took up the philosophical implications of this expansion by engaging with textuality as such (and, in the process, self-consciously creating a traditions of writers acutely aware of bibliographic signification” (Fanning, 2003, p.361). Consequently, Sterne and Swift’s texts are self-reflexive in that they are primarily about writing. This self-reflexivity is to an extent that Henke goes on to write “*A Tale of a Tub* and *Tristram Shandy* are foremost examples of self-reflexive metaliterature: hetero-referential in their intertextual relation to other texts and discourses outside themselves (which however often bear self-reflexively upon them), and self-referential in that they are their own topic” (cited in Huber et al., 2005, p.26). Thus, Tristram writes about the beginning of chapters:

I Have a strong propensity in me to begin this chapter very nonsensically, and I will not balk my fancy.—Accordingly I set off thus. (Sterne, 64)

In addition, he writes about the ending of the chapters as well:

I must beg leave, before I finish this chapter, to enter a caveat in the breast of my fair reader;—and it is this:—Not to take it absolutely for granted from an unguarded word or two which I have dropp'd in it,——“That I am a married man.” (Ibid, 45)

Tristram's self-reflexivity calls attention to its disorderly plot and atemporality, and in effect, involves the readers in his progression of writing. For instance, in volume three of the novel, in the course of the childbirth, when Tristram's Uncle Toby falls asleep and Dr. Slop is engaged with the midwife, Tristram enjoys a moment of commenting on the composition:

All my heroes are off my hands;—'tis the first time I have had a moment to spare,— and I'll make use of it, and write my preface. (Ibid, 173)

Furthermore, it is not until Book III that Tristram decides to write a preface to his novel in a self-reflexive style:

No, I'll not say a word about it,—here it is;—in publishing it,—I have appealed to the world,—and to the world I leave it;—it must speak for itself. 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 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 [...]Now, my dear Anti-Shandean, and thrice able critics, and fellow-labourers, (for to you I write this Preface)——and to you, most subtle statesmen and discreet doctors (do—pull off your beards) renowned for gravity and wisdom. (Ibid, 174)

Having presented his intended preface, Tristram goes on to write a list of critics and friends who might be the addressee of the very preface. Therefore, “*Tristram Shandy* is unusual in its radical asymmetry, in its frequent shifts in time and level, moving backwards and forwards, without sustaining a temporal ground or consistent diegetic location” (Williams, 2004, p.48).

Another narrative technique which is precisely used in postmodernist novels is to provide the readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of the narrative. Such novels refuse to allow the readers a passive role of a consumer and explicitly remind them the artificiality of the novel that they are reading. For instance, Patricia Waugh points out that Donald Barthelme, among other postmodernist novelists, presents “the reader with acrostics, puzzles to be solved, and black boxes or blank pages to interpret, according to the reader's own fictional predilection” (Waugh, 1984, p.43). Yet, besides black and blank pages, there is another technique that both Barthelme and Sterne have penchant for, i.e. they both interrupt the narration in order to ask the readers some questions. As an example, in his *Snow White* (1967), Donald Barthelme interrupts the story by a questionnaire:

1. Do you like the story so far? Yes () No ()
2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes () No ()
3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure? Yes () No ()
4. That Jane is the wicked stepmother-figure? Yes () No ()
5. In the further development of the story, would you like more emotion () or less emotion ()? (Barthelme, 1967, p.88)

In a very similar vein, at the end of the Book IV of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne interrupts his novel and self-reflexively asks the readers a question:

And now that you have just got to the end of these four volumes—the thing I have to *ask* is, how you feel your heads? my own akes dismally—as for your healths, I know, they are much better—True *Shandeism*, think what you will against it, opens the heart and lungs. (Sterne, 303)

Narrative Disorder and Time Shifts

A familiar device in *Tristram Shandy*'s narrative is frequent shifts in time, and going against a linear plot. Yet, the significance of this device is in its self-reflexivity. In other words, Sterne decides on defying the conventions of a linear plot, and concurrently discusses the matter with his readers. As Parker maintains, “narrator Tristram's self-conscious running commentary on the disorderly narrative trajectory makes clear that Sterne deliberately works against the deterministic tendencies of the linear plot—and the deterministic thinking endemic to the eighteenth century” (Parker, 2007, p.32). As Sterne writes:

When a man is telling a story in the strange way I do mine, he is obliged continually to be going backwards and forwards to keep all tight together in the reader's fancy. (Sterne, 416)

In a similar view to Parker, Williams believes that *Tristram Shandy*'s disorderly plot and self-reflexivity results in disintegration. “Tristram frequently interrupts the narrated events and reflexively calls attention to the question of narration itself, seemingly going beyond the pale of a normal or straight narrative. Overall, on the surface of it, the novel appears to be manifestly nonlinear, knotted, disorderly, convoluted, and fragmented, almost to the point of disintegration, as a number of critics have noted” (Williams, 2004, p.24). Additionally, Hillis Miller goes as far to label *Tristram Shandy* “an exemplar of the deconstruction of linear plot” (cited in Williams, 2004, p.26). “Like a metafictionist”, to mark Özün's words, “*Tristram Shandy* abandons centers and deconstructs oppositional hierarchies; as a replacement for these, it offers *différance*, which is the play of signifiers, which is the fusion of delay and being different” (Özün, 2012, p.82).

Collaborative Reader in *Tristram Shandy*

Expecting the novel to be made up of a linear plot and the words written from left to right and top to bottom, the eighteenth century readers of *Tristram Shandy* might have experienced an intense wonder as they were confronted with a text that included blank, black, and marbled pages, and an unusual narrative style that created problem for them. The placing of blank, marbled, black, and missing pages, lines, diagrams, and asterisks and dashes in the novel, all are aimed to make readers collaborators of the text. To highlight Wolfgang Iser's terms, by inserting typographical peculiarities, Sterne creates 'blanks' or 'gaps' in his text and stimulates his readers to construct their own meaning and mark their collaboration within the text. However, it must be stressed that the reception theory per se is not the focus of this study, but the self-reflexive manner in which it is presented. Furthermore, to this may be added those parts in which Sterne directly addresses the readers as 'reader'. In this regard, *Tristram Shandy* bears close resemblance to postmodernist novels, in that they make their readers deconstruct and then reconstruct the text by filling in the 'gaps' between textual sections.

Instances in which Sterne not only refuses to draw the attention of the readers to the story, but also directly makes them aware of the formal structures of the text, permeate in *Tristram Shandy*. In other words, Sterne as an author, prevents his readers from being hypnotized by the illusion of the make-believe, and makes all his efforts to transform the reader into a writer at the end of the text (Saraçoğlu, 2003, p.11). For instance, in chapter seven of the Book I, after giving the account of Yorick's death, his grave, and the sentence on his epitaph, "Alas, poor Yorick", Sterne inserts two black pages, and draws the attention of the readers and leaves the possibility of filling the 'gaps' for them. Therefore, in an avant-garde way, Sterne uses the physical qualities of the text to convey a message about life and death to his readers, and almost in a self-parody style, makes them collaborators of the text. And in another example, in chapter thirty-eight of the Book VI, when Tristram discusses the love story of his Uncle Toby and widow Wadman, the self-reflexivity of the narrative is presented in two ways. First, Tristram the narrator, directly addresses the readers and invites them to take part in creating meaning for the text that they are reading:

—And possibly, gentle reader, with such a temptation— so wouldst thou: For never did thy eyes behold, or thy concupiscence covet any thing in this world, more concupiscible than widow *Wadman*. 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. (Sterne, 422)

Secondly, having said this, Sterne inserts a whole blank page and leaves it to the imagination of the readers to fill it in whatever way they wish, or maybe literally take a pen in their hands and draw a picture of widow Wadman. This echoes Roman Ingarden's

phenomenological approach in reading a literary text. Ingarden believes that in considering a literary text, one must take into account not only the text itself, but also equally the actions involved in responding to the very text. Thus, a literary work comes into existence when it is realized from the side of the reader; consequently, the convergence of the reader and the text is required (cited in Lodge, 2000, p.189). In chapter XI of the Book II Sterne remarks:

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all;—so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.

For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own. (Ibid, 96)

It must be pointed out that this sentence echoes Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749). In *Tom Jones*, the narrator says that “and yet, there is no Conduct so fair and disinterested, but that it may be misunderstood by Ignorance, and misrepresented by Malice, I have been sometimes tempted to preserve my own reputation at the expense of my reader, and to transcribe the original, or at least to quote chapter and verse, whenever I have made use either of the thought or expression of another” (Fielding, 674). This sentence in *Tristram Shandy* is copied wittily because the idea of plagiarism and originality was of particular interest to Sterne.

Considering the convergence of the reader and the text in *Tristram Shandy*, David Lodge writes:

Sterne’s conception of a literary text is that it is something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination. If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us. A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative” (Lodge, 2000, p.189).

To this, may be added the pages and sentences that abound in asterisks, dashes, and typographical manipulations. “The most immediately striking visual feature of Sterne’s text”, argues Keymer, “is his remarkable use of the asterisk and the dash” (Keymer, 2006, p.115). Therefore, the use of dashes and asterisks draws attention to the textuality, and once again, stresses the power of physical text to convey more than what is merely written on a page. In other words, the typographical manipulations resemble mirrors held up to the readers to constantly remind them what they are reading is a fictional work which is overflowing with gaps, and their active contribution is required in order to create meaning.

Walsh, “must read Sterne’s print both as a text of mimetic verbal referents and as a non-verbal object that communicates by means of its manipulation of the space on the page” (Walsh, 2002, p.180). An instance of the marbled pages is the beginning of chapter XL in the Book VI of *Tristram Shandy*. In this example, after discussing the structure of his narrative, Sterne draws four curved lines on the page, each representing the plot line of the previous volumes of the novel. Then he goes on to add: “these were the four lines I moved in through my first, second, third, and fourth volumes.—In the fifth volume I have been very good,—the precise line I have described in it being this” (Sterne, 425-6), then he draws another curved line. After labeling the marbled page as “Sterne’s most famous textual experiment”, Keymer maintains that “the marbled page may be seen as a response to, or even struggle against, the fixity of print” (Keymer, 2009, p.133). In other words, since the printing process in Sterne’s own time was done manually, marbled pages in each volume had their own specific design; and consequently, produced a different result. Having this in his mind, Sterne inserted the marbled pages in his novel to procure his readers’ reactions and contributions to the novel.

In addition to asterisks and marbled pages there are numerous instances in which Sterne self-reflexively addresses the readers. For instance, when the discussions of Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby have been prolonged and Tristram seems desperate to put an end to their debates, he writes:

Was every day of my life to be as busy a day as this,—and to take up,—truce— I will not finish that sentence till I have made an observation upon the strange state of affairs between the reader and myself. (Ibid, 256)

As a final point, in the second chapter of the Book VIII, once again Tristram addresses the readers and self-consciously writes about the writing techniques he is employing:

—But now I am talking of beginning a book, and have long had a thing upon my mind to be imparted to the reader, which if not imparted now, can never be imparted to him as long as I live (whereas the COMPARISON may be imparted to him any hour in the day)—I’ll just mention it, and begin in good earnest.

The thing is this. That of all the several ways of beginning a book which are now in practice throughout the known world, I am confident my own way of doing it is the best— I’m sure it is the most religious—for I begin with writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second. (Ibid, 490)

Conclusion

A prominent aspect in *Tristram Shandy*’s narrative that makes it distinguishable from the typical eighteenth-century novels is its self-reflexive narrative. *Tristram Shandy* abounds in commentaries and descriptions on the processes of composition because Sterne intends to make

his readers aware of the fact that what they are reading is a fictional work. In addition, Sterne makes use of physical qualities of the book to convey messages that are beyond verbal referents. For instance, black and marbled pages, asterisks and dashes, all are employed wittily to communicate with the readers. As a result, Sterne's experimental techniques and his operations on textuality, make *Tristram Shandy* an avant-garde novel that can be affiliated to postmodernist novels.

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