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THE SENSE OF A BEGINNING IN LAURENCE STERNE'S MASTERPIECE

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ABSTRACT



From its first appearance in 1759, Laurence Sterne's comic masterpiece, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, reveals its parodic nature by subverting the typical conventions of the novel as a genre. Among these conventions, the most important consists in a rectilinear view of human existence, implying a sense of progression from the beginning to the end. This traditional form of narrative appears to reflect a well-known type of paradigmatic structure, brilliantly discussed by Frank Kermode in his book *The Sense of an Ending* (1967).

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the ways in which *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, with its very peculiar style, opposes the conventional linear progression towards an ending, by emphasizing what could be called "the sense of a beginning". In effect, in one of the preliminary chapters, the narrator claims the right to "tell his story his own way", which implies that he will not follow a straight-line path towards an ending; on the contrary, he will proceed through the tortuous path of renewed beginnings. Indeed, there are more than one beginning in *Tristram Shandy*. The following analysis aims to show the crucial passages that reveal, throughout the novel, this fundamental insight about the significance of a continuously renewed beginning.

Key words: Laurence Sterne; *Tristram Shandy*; beginning; ending.

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1. INTRODUCTION

From its first appearance in 1759, Laurence Sterne's comic masterpiece reveals its parodic nature by subverting the typical conventions of the novel as a genre (Folkenflik, 2009). From its very title, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* mocks the usual denomination of "Life and Adventures", which had become the standard way of presenting a narrative since the successful appearance of *The Life and Strange, Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). By subtly recasting the hackneyed formula, Sterne shifts the reader's attention from outside to inside: from the

factual, objective level of events and actions to the inner dimension of subjective opinions and emotions (Keymer, 2006). Furthermore, the purpose of the title is made explicit by the famous motto from the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus: "Not things, but opinions about things, trouble men" (*Tristram Shandy* 1, 540) – a quotation that was originally conceived as an epigraph for the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, but effectively embracing the whole novel.

In its intrinsically metatextual nature, Sterne's masterpiece proposes itself as a parody of the narrative conventions commonly used, in

Eighteenth-century fiction, to construct realistic and meaningful stories; and among these conventions, the most important consists in a rectilinear view of human existence, implying a sense of progression from the beginning to the end (Keymer, 2002). This traditional form of narrative writing appears to reflect a well-known type of paradigmatic structure, brilliantly discussed by Frank Kermode in his book *The Sense of an Ending* (1967).

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the ways in which *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, with its very peculiar writing style, opposes the conventional linear progression towards an ending, by emphasizing what could be called "the sense of a beginning". Indeed, there are more than one beginning in *Tristram Shandy*. The following analysis aims to show the crucial passages that reveal, throughout the novel, this fundamental insight about the significance of a continuously renewed beginning.

2. The *incipit* of the novel

Sterne's comic masterpiece opens with a parody of the conventional *incipit* of the novelistic form, usually focused on the birth of the hero. If the birth is assumed as the initial moment of human existence, Tristram Shandy begins his autobiographical narration by retrieving the story of his conception:

*I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concern'd in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind; [...]—Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,—I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me (*Tristram Shandy* 5, my emphasis).*

"I wish either my father or my mother ...": no *incipit* could more eloquently introduce the search for a beginning that extends to the retrieval of the entire existence of the self. The act of writing *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* begins with a verb of desire: and this desire coincides with a retrospective view, with an expression of regret for what might have been but did not happen (Gregori, 1987). "I wish": as shown in the quoted passage, the opening verb appears to enclose the whole "Being" of the authorial persona, going back to the initial moment of biological conception and projecting its effects on the present action of writing. It is precisely this *reductio ad absurdum* that emphasizes the importance of a true beginning on both levels, the level of real and fictional existence.

As the attentive reader will perceive, the *incipit* of the novel suffices to convey the sense of this retrieval operated by Tristram, who is both the narrator of his *Life and Opinions* and the subject of the thoughts, feelings and regrets that motivate his writing. Right from the beginning of the story, the protagonist questions himself on the sense of his coming into the world, expressing a biased and distorted view of reality (Gregori, 1987). A negative perception of himself and of the world transpires from the first chapters of the novel, as shown in the following passage:

— *I wish I had been born in the Moon, or in any of the planets, [...] for it could not well have fared worse with me in any of them (tho' I will not answer for Venus) than it has in this vile, dirty planet of ours,—which o' my conscience, with reverence be it spoken, I take to be made up of the shreds and clippings of the rest;—not but the planet is well enough, provided a man could be born in it to a great title or to a great estate; or could any how contrive to be called up to publick charges, and employments of dignity or power;—but that is not my case; [...]—for which cause I affirm it over again to be one of the vilest worlds that ever was made; --- for I can truly say, that from the first hour I drew my breath in it, to this, that I can now scarce draw it at all [...];-- I have been the*

continual sport of what the world calls Fortune (*Tristram Shandy* 9-10, my emphasis).

This passage, taken from the fifth chapter of the first volume, evidently recalls the *incipit* of the novel through the narrator's regret about his own birth. It is worth noting, however, the gradual intensification of Tristram's inner attitude: from the expression of an impossible desire ("I wish I had been born in the Moon") to a paradoxical conviction ("I take to be made up of the shreds and clippings of the rest"), from a repeated assertion ("I affirm it over again") to a strong declaration ("I can truly say"). This climax is even more significant when considering that it marks the passage from the self-discourse of the first-person narrator to the actual dialogue with a virtual interlocutor – an imaginary friend, a sort of *alter ego* who is represented by the reader. As a matter of fact, in the chapter that immediately follows, Tristram Shandy assumes his proper narrative identity postulating a progressive, collaborative relationship with an ideal reader. Thus, addressing his hypothetical interlocutor, the narrator claims the right to "tell *his* story *his* own way" (*Tristram Shandy* 10), which implies that he does not follow a straight-line path towards an ending; on the contrary, he will proceed through the tortuous path of renewed beginnings.

3. A new beginning in the middle of the novel

Indeed, while the title of the novel suggests the idea of an autobiographical narrative, in *Tristram Shandy* we do not really read about the protagonist's life, but about hilarious episodes that are mainly concerned with the lives of his father and his uncle. From the very beginning of *The Life and Opinions*, Tristram explores his own identity by representing the members of his family: "I wish either my father or my mother...".

The opening act of wishing is of the utmost importance to introduce the crucial topic of personal renewal, or rebirth, inasmuch as it emphasises the distance between the imagined self and the actual self (Gutiérrez Sumillera, 2008). From this perspective, Tristram's metanarrative underlines the general necessity of telling the story of one's life in order to achieve self-awareness

through the knowledge and acceptance of the past. The process of arranging and reworking former events, shaping them into a compelling though fragmentary story, can lead to a plausible construction and understanding of the self. It is not without reason that the greatest part of Sterne's novel is devoted to describing in detail all the disasters of Tristram's first years: his interrupted conception, his adventurous birth, the choice of his name, his bungled christening, the accident with the sash-window that circumcises him (Harries, 2009). Furthermore, the narration of these events is literally interwoven with the voices of the Shandy family, and the narrator is called upon to interpret them, acknowledging the absolute singularity and otherness of each person.

If there is a progression in the story being told, this should be sought in the dynamic adaptation and evolution of the narrator's consciousness. It has often been pointed out that the third volume of *Tristram Shandy* plays a crucial role in the general economy of the novel, inasmuch as it introduces the long-awaited birth of the hero (Gregori, 1987). It is no coincidence, therefore, that the *incipit* of the third volume appears to signal unequivocally a new beginning:

—'I wish, Dr. Slop', quoth my uncle Toby (repeating his *wish* for Dr. Slop a second time, and with a degree of more zeal and earnestness in his manner of *wishing*, than he had *wished* it at first) —
—'I wish, Dr. Slop', quoth my uncle Toby, 'you had seen what prodigious armies we had in Flanders'.

My uncle Toby's *wish* did Dr. Slop a disservice which his heart never intended any man, —Sir, it confounded him—and thereby putting his ideas first into confusion, and then to flight, he could not rally them again for the soul of him (*Tristram Shandy* 125, my emphasis).

The insistent iteration of "I wish", declined in all possible forms and put in Toby's mouth at the very moment of Tristram's birth, is intended to cast ridicule on the absurdity of human wishes. But the expression of this unseasonable desire is not merely

aimed at parodying uncle Toby's passionate interest in military matters. The meaningful repetition of the optative "I wish", which marks the very beginning of Sterne's work, eloquently reveals the narrator's intention of reconsidering and reshaping the whole story from a different standpoint. In approaching the heart of his history, Tristram rereads the initial phases in the light of a new wisdom, having acquired a more comprehensive understanding through the dialogical relationship with the members of his family. The willing disposition to accept and appreciate the existence of the others in his own life, including the weight of their respective hobby-horses or whimsical obsessions, allows Tristram to recognize, in the voice of uncle Toby, his own inner voice and his personal wish.

4. The end as a new beginning

Tristram Shandy ends with Yorick's reply to Mrs. Shandy's ingenuous question about a curious procreative history that has just been told:

L - - d! said my mother, what is all this story about? ——

A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick —— And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard (*Tristram Shandy* 539).

Apart from the complex and multilayered allusions contained in this expression, it is evident that "Yorick's joke also stands as mock-epitaph to the work as a whole" (Loveridge, 1992: 35). In effect, a *cock-and-bull* story is a long, rambling, unbelievable tale – that is to say, an idle and directionless story without an end. Thus, the final inconclusive expression "a COCK and a BULL", put in Yorick's mouth when answering a question of Tristram's mother, leads the reader back to the very beginning of the story: "I wish either my father or my mother". For more than one reason, this conclusion "in which nothing is concluded" configures itself as a new starting point, which encourages the reader to reassess his (or her) interpretation, looking for a sense of the beginning.

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