

c. 1940 Paper written by Marguerite Young (1908-1995) written for a class taught by René Wellek (1903-1995), at the University of Iowa, while she is working towards a Ph.D. in Philosophy and English. (Transcribed from a single space document, possibly a penultimate draft (see copy edits), from Box #2, Uncat ZA MS.314/YCAL MSS 547 Beinecke Library archives. Bracketed words in yellow are Young's handwritten annotations/corrections. All original formatting is maintained.)

This paper is written to suggest the influence of philosophy on the composition of Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy. What has often been considered as merely romantic eccentricity, an exaggerated straining after individuality, will be seen, in this light, as the consequence of Sterne's experimenting with the experimental world of the British empiricists, especially Locke—though I believe that the intellectual atmosphere of the time must also be taken into consideration, and that this was one of scepticism as to the supposedly eternal verities. Yorick, Sterne tells us, was “as mercurial and sublimated a composition, as heteroclitic a creature in all his declensions, with as much life, and whim, and gait de Coeur about him, as the kindest climate could have engendered and put together”—he was, in fact, unhackneyed and unpracticed in the [stultified] world. Sterne's attempt, like Yorick's, is to look at the world with a fresh eye, seeing things impressionistically and without the traditional values which had accreted around them. The method is analytic rather than synthetic, in spite of his intensive subjectivism, Sterne sees reality as mechanistic, material. Shaftesbury said, “Locke threw all order and virtue out of the world.” Sterne was free from dogmatism as he. Walter Bagehot says, of his sermons, that Auguste Comte might have admitted most of them—“they are healthy statements of earthly truths, but they would be just as true if there was no religion at all, if the ‘valuable illusion’ of a deity were omitted from the belief of mankind.” We are very far from Plato's theory of the immutability of ideas. Rather, all of our abstract ideas have been

2.

directly or indirectly derives[sic] from experience, and all of our complex concepts are built up out of simple concepts.

Sterne himself has made many remarks on his method of composition. They show him to be a self-conscious artist, for whom the “puzzled skein” of thought is not accidental but the literary employment of a theory of knowledge. “Mr. Shandy, my father, sir, would see nothing in the light in which others placed it; he placed things in his own light/ he would weigh nothing in common scales; no, he was too refined a researcher to lie open to so gross an imposition. To come to the exact weight of things in the scientific steelyard, the fulcrum, he would say, should be almost invisible, to avoid all friction from popular tenets; without this the minutiae of philosophy, which should always turn the balance, will have no weight at all. Knowledge, like matter, he would affirm, was divisible in infinitum; that the grains and scruples were as much a part of it as the gravitation of the whole world. In a word, he would say, error was error, no matter where it fell; whether in a fraction or a pound, ‘twas alike fatal to truth, as she was kept down at the bottom of her well as inevitably by a mistake in the dust of a butterfly’s wing, as in the disc of the sun, the moon and all the stars of heaven, put together.” This passage shows Sterne’s interest in sciences—the influence of Newton on morality no less than on the idea of the universe. Newtonianism, carried to its logical conclusion, shows, according to Ramsperger, every feeling and thought, every purpose and good or bad intention, to be the product of the motions of matter. Sterne’s position is that all ideas are derived from experience. If man

3.

were made of glass and one were able to look in on his motions and machineries, he tells us, it would be possible to view the soul as stark naked, observe all her motions, her machinations, trace all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth, watch her loose in her frisks, gambols, and cap[t]rices. “In the planet Mercury belike it may be so—bodies vitrified, as I said above, is not the case of the inhabitants of the earth; our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapped up here in a dark covering of uncrystallized flesh and blood, so that if we would come to the specific characters of them we must go some other way to work.” This suggests, of course, both John Lock’s[sic] study of the nature of the mind and Hume’s phrase that our minds provide the “one spotlight in an eternal darkness.” π Sterne speaks of Locke’s “Essay on Human Understanding” as a history of what passes in a man’s own mind. What a great confusion comes from little words! The sceptical philosophy of his time, that ideas are copied from real things, are ectypal, not archetypal, conditions Tristram Shandy, a sensationalistic writing. “Could an historiographer drive on his history, as a muleteer drives on his mule—straight forward; for instance, from Rome all the way to Loretto, without every once turning his head aside, either to the right hand or to the left, he might venture to foretell you to an hour when he should get to his journey’s end; but the thing is, morally speaking, impossible, for if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid. He will have views and prospects to himself perpetually soliting[sic] his eye, which he can no more helpt[sic] standing still to look at than he can fly...” The Cartesian dualism between body and soul is broken down. “A

4.

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.” All our ideas, according to this philosophy, even our most exalted ideas as of God, come from the compounding of sensations. There is nothing given in nature. Man must be, therefore, a “motive-monger.” He must study himself and his own processes of judgment. ¶ Having quoted Locke on the differences between it and judgment, Sterne addresses his anti-Shandean readers—“My most zealous wish and fervent prayer in your behalf, and in my own too, in case the thing is not done already for us, is, that the great gifts and endowments, both of it and judgment, with everything which usually goes along with them, such as memory, fancy, genius, eloquence, quick parts, and that not, may this precious moment, without sting or measure, let or hindrance, be poured down warm as each of us could bear it, scum and sediment and all (for I would not have a drop lost) into the several receptacles, cells, cellules, domiciles, dormitories, refectories and space places of our brains, in such sort that they might continue to be injected and tunned into, according to the true intent and meaning of my wish, until every vessel of them, both great and small, be so replenished, saturated, and filled up therewith, that no more would it save a man's life, could possibly be got either in or out. Bless us, what noble work we should make! How should I tickle it off! And what spirits should I find myself in, to be writing away for such readers! And you, just heaven! With what raptures would sit and read! But oh, 'tis too much. I am sick; I faint away deliciously at the thought of it; 'tis more than nature can bear! Lay hold of me, I am giddy; I am stone-blind, I'm dying, I am gone!” He goes on to discuss the fact that there is no universal assent

5.

as to truth. He gives a catalogue of mistaken philosophers suggesting [that . delete over
xxxxxxxxx] Rabelais. It is a modernist's attack upon medievalism. The only truth proceeds from observation. "I hate set dissertations, and, above all, things in the world, 'tis one of the silliest things in one of them to darken your hypothesis by placing a number of tall, opaque words, one before another in a right line, betwixt your own and your reader's conception, when in all likelihood, if you had looked about, you might have seen something standing, or hanging up, which would have cleared the point at once; for what hindrance, hurt, or harm, doth the laudable desire of knowledge bring to any man, if even from a sot, a pot, a fool, a stool, a winter mitten, a truckle for a pulley, the lid of a goldsmith's crucible, an oil bottle, an old slipper, or a cane chair." What is important is not architecture but the principle of change within the human being. It is hard to see the world as a whole. It is made up, rather, of rags and tags—even this planet is made up of the shreds of other worlds. "I told the Christian reader;--I say Christian,--hoping he is one; and if he is not, I am sorry for it;--and only beg he will consider the matter with himself, and not lay the blame entirely upon this book;--I told him, Sir,--for, in good truth, when a man is telling a story in the strange way I do mine, he is obliged continually to be going backwards and forwards too keep all tight together in the reader's fancy;--which, for my own part, if I did not take heed to do more than at first, there is so much unfixed and equivocal matter starting up, with so many breaks and gaps in it,--and so little service do the stars afford, which, nevertheless, I hang up in some of the darkest passages, knowing that the world is apt to lose its way, with all the lights the sun itself at noonday can give it,--and now you see I am lost myself! But 'tis

6.

my father's fault; and whenever my brains come to be dissected, you will perceive, without spectacles, that he has left a large, uneven thread, as you sometimes see in an unsaleable piece of cambric, running along the whole length of the web, and so untowardly you cannot so much as cut out a ** (here I hand up a couple of lights again) or a fillet, or a thumb-staill, but is seen or felt." What is here expressed is not merely the oddity of perverse artist, but a theory of the universe, one which has conditioned the characterization of even the lady's maid. Similarly, Sterne, as a preacher, lectured on such irreligious subjects as the particles of matter which comprise the universe. It is impossible to have a knowledge of reality which transcends the phenomenal world. There seems to be no such thing, evidently, as reality which comprises a whole. Sterne rather points to the particular, the irrelevant, the accidental—and shows that our ideas often travel at a more rapid rate than the experience which they describe.

Laurence Sterne's library included the works of Voltaire, Hobbes, Locke, Bishop Berkeley, Hume, Newton. Nelson Preus has traced the history of criticism directed toward a clarification of Tristram Shandy, showing how few commentators recognized this author's relation to the psychological writers—though Sterne himself recognized that his aesthetic practice was derived from such presumably arid source. "...and the measure of Heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions," he writes. Coleridge, in his Miscellaneous Criticism, writes of Sterne's philosophic basis as follows—"The bringing forward into distinct consciousness those minutiae of thought and feeling which appear

7.

trifles, have an importance only for the moment, and yet almost every man feels on one way or another. Thus it has the novelty of an individual peculiarity, and yet the interest of something that belongs to our common nature.” There was, in general, confusion among the Victorian critics on the subject of Sterne. “Sterne sent forth his work in fragments,” Fitzgerald wrote, not recognizing that the breaking up of reality into atomic particles was the very secret of his genius. “How far my pen has been fatigued, like those of other travelers, in this journey of it, over so barren a track—the world must judge,” Sterne writes, “but the traces of it, which are now all set o’ vibrating together this moment, tell me ‘tis the most fruitful and busy period of life; for as I had made no convention with my man with the sun, as to time,—by stopping and talking to every soul I met, who was not in a full trot—joining all parties before me—waiting for every soul behind—hailing all those who were coming through cross-roads, arresting all kinds of beggars, pilgrims, fiddlers, friars—not passing by a woman in a mulberry-tree without commending her legs, and tempting her into conversation with a pinch of snuff—In short, by seizing every handle, of what size or shape soever, which chance held out to me in this journey—I turned my plain into a city,—I was always in company, and with great variety too, and as my mule loved society as much as myself, and had some proposals always on his part to offer to every beast he met,—I am confident we could have passed through Fall Mall or St. James’s Street, for a month together, with fewer adventures,—and seen less of human nature.” The packing of many details into a narrative without adventure but the psychological, suggests Proust, suggests Joyce. “As many pictures as have been given of my father, how like him soever in different

8.

airs and attitudes, not one or all of them can ever help the reader to any kind of preconception of how my father would think, speak, or act, upon any untried occasion or occurrence of life. There was that infinitude of oddities in him, and of chances along with it, by which handle he would take a thing—it baffled, Sir, all calculations. The truth was, his road lay so very far on one side from that wherein most men travelled, that every object before him presented a face and section of itself to his eye altogether different from the plan and elevation[sic] of it seen by the rest of mankind. In other words, 'twas a different object, and, in course, was differently considered." The book is made up of such objects seen in the light of intense subjectivism. Little things loom large. The subjectivism and the impressionism could derive from Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Leibnitz, too, had founded a new system of psychology in harmony with his own monadology. Perhaps Sterne, like Blake, had discovered the "small worlds" with the help of Leibnitz. Sichel says—"Sterne founded modern impressionism, substituting for descriptive literature a diary of sensations, and a scale of cadences for a string of sentences"—and that sensationalism is a true[r] name for Sterne's manner than sentimentality. He shows a distrust of abstractions. Herbert Read, showing the parallel between Sterne and Rousseau as to sensibility and spontaneity, writes, "He was everywhere indebted to philosophy." Ernest Baker assumed that Sterne did not understand philosophic thought but was merely something of an opportunist—an argument which seems doubtful, as the work is conditioned throughout by the great empiricist theory of sensation and does not merely utilize this concept of reality in a haphazard or decorative way. Muir writes more fairly—

9.

“The struggle with insurmountable obstacles, the perpetual losing of the thread of the story to get everything in, are his devices—perhaps the most economical ever invented—for building up an image of the infinite contradictoriness and variety of life.”

The most complete study of Sterne’s philosophic basis seems to be that of Nelson Pruess. Pruess shows parallel passages between Locke and Sterne. Sterne employs, for example, Locke’s theory of the association of ideas to apologize for his technique[sic] of digressions. There is an essay on duration, taken from Locke. The complex ideas of relation, Sterne learned from Locke, could be analyzed into their constituent simple ideas—thus getting to the real springs of action. Locke says that sight is the most important of sensations. Sterne remarks, “Let is[sic] suffice to affirm, that of all the senses, the eye...has the quickest[sic] commerce with the soul...” There are also passages from Locke on the nullity of conscience, the unknowability of matter, the reasons for error in our judgment, the theory of expectations. “I may find it very hard, in writing such a book as Tristram Shandy,” Sterne writes, “to mutilate everything in it down to the prudish humour of every particular.” His characters insist upon their individuality, their departure from the so-called norm of assent—in line with Locke’s plea to encourage man to reflect on the peculiar workings of his own mind. They are not so fickle as they are human. “My young master in London is dead!” said Obadiah.—“A green satin night-gown of my mother’s, which had been twice scared, was the first idea which Obadiah’s exclamation brought into

10.

10.

Susannah's head.—Well might Locke write a chapter upon the imperfection of words...My mother's whole wardrobe followed—her “orange tawny, her white and yellow lute strings—her brown taffeta—her bone-laced caps, her bed-gowns, and comfortable underpetticoats.—Not a rag was left behind.”

The whole work may be taken, finally, as the artistic rendition of the “corpuscular” philosophy to which Bishop Berkeley and other Platonic idealists objected—its breaking up of forms into Democritean fragments and irreducible accidentia. What Sterne used as a philosophy which seemed, by its nature, a threat upon the “soul” of man. Employing it, he lighted up the dark corners and hidden alleys, brought into consciousness much which had been unconscious, destroyed the dogma of a universal. The work is difficult only to those whose ideas are fixed upon conventions and arbitrary standards of order.

Handwritten annotation after final paragraph: [It occurs to me that Sterne is more a sensationalist than an atomist. These two views coalesced but not necessarily so: Sterne gave up his atomistic beginnings.]