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GYÖRGY LUKÁCS

SOUL & FORM

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The scene is a simply furnished, middle-class girl's room where new and very old objects are mixed together in a curiously inorganic fashion. The wallpaper is brightly colored and rather common, the furniture is small, white, and uncomfortable in the typical fashion of young middle-class girls' rooms; only the desk is handsome, large, and comfortable, and so is the big brass bed in the corner, behind a folding screen. On the walls, the same inorganic mixture: family pictures and Japanese woodcuts, reproductions of modern paintings and of old ones currently in fashion: Whistler, Velasquez, Vermeer. Above the desk, a photograph of a fresco by Giotto.

At the desk sits a strikingly handsome girl. On her lap lies a book: Goethe's aphorisms; she turns the pages and appears to be reading; she is waiting for someone. The bell rings. The girl now becomes immersed in her reading, so that she hears the bell ring only for the second time; she stands up to greet the newcomer. He is a fellow-student from the University, about the same age as she, perhaps very slightly younger: a tall, well-built, fair-haired young man of twenty or twenty-two, his hair parted at the side; he wears pince-nez and a colored jacket, is studying modern languages, and is
in love with the girl. Under his arm he is holding several tattered leather-bound volumes—English authors from the beginning of the nineteenth century. He puts them down on the desk. They shake hands and sit down.

She: When are you going to give your paper at the seminar?

He: I'm not sure yet. I still have to look up a few things. And I must go through a few volumes of the Spectator and the Tatler.

She: Why take so much trouble—for those people? What you've done is good enough just as it is. Who'll notice if anything's lacking?

He: That may be so. But Joachim ...

She (interrupting him): Oh yes, because you always discuss everything with him.

He (smiles): Perhaps not only because of that. And what if it were? I do it for my own sake. I enjoy working, just at the moment. I like it. It's so nice to deal with little facts. They bring me face to face with many things which otherwise I should have been too lazy to notice. And yet I'm not thinking hard and I don't have to make an effort. I lead a comfortable life—and call it my "scientific conscience." And I like to be called a "serious scholar."

She (delighted with the conversation): Don't be cynical, Vincent. I know very well how important it is for you to round off your material—how deeply serious you are about it all.

Vincent (who is not altogether convinced, but pleased to accept this flattering view): It may be that you're right. Certainly. (Another small pause.) I've brought the Sterne along. As you see, I didn't forget.

She (picks up the volume and strokes the binding): A beautiful edition.

Vincent: Yes, it's the 1808 one. Lovely. Have you seen the Reynolds frontispiece? Splendid, isn't it?

She: And the other engravings, how pretty. Look at this! (For a while they look at the engravings.) What are you going to read me from it?

Vincent: I might start with the Sentimental Journey. Then you could read Tristram Shandy by yourself later on, if you felt like it. Agreed? (His English accent is very good but rather consciously affected.) Listen now. (He reads the beginning of the journey, the first little sentimental episode with the mendicant friar, the humorous classification of the travelers, the purchase of the chaise, the first sentimental-Platonic adventure with the unknown lady. He reads rapidly and nervously, with a pure accent, without any sentimentality, using an ironic tone of voice—so faint as to be almost imperceptible—especially in the sentimental passages. The way in which he is reading suggests that the text is not very important to him; just something, among the
many beautiful things that have come his way, that has happened to please him, and even the manner in which it pleases him is a question of mood, of taking pleasure in his own moods. When the two of them are deep in their reading, there is a knock at the door, strong and emphatic, and immediately afterwards Joachim, another fellow-student, enters the room. He is as old as they, perhaps a little older, taller than Vincent, dressed in black, almost shabby. His features are hard and fixed. He too is a student of modern languages and he too is in love with the girl. This is why he is displeased by the atmosphere of quiet harmony which he senses between the pair. He goes up to them and shakes hands. Then he takes the book out of Vincent’s hands and says: What are you reading?

Vincent (a little nervously, partly because Joachim’s entrance has disturbed them, partly because he senses a disguised challenge in the question): Sterne.

Joachim (accepting the tone, smiling): Don’t tell me I’m disturbing you?

Vincent (also smiling): Well, yes, as a matter of fact. Sterne isn’t for you. He’s beautiful. Amusing. Rich. And perfectly irregular!

She (displeased by the interruption): Are you two going to have another argument?

Joachim: No. At least, not I. And today least of all. (To Vincent.) There’s just one thing you’ve got wrong—don’t be afraid, I don’t intend to argue—it isn’t that Sterne is not for me, although it’s true that I don’t care for him. It’s this one here (he points at the volume of Goethe, which is still lying in the girl’s lap) that Sterne doesn’t go with. Were you reading that before you started on the Sterne?

She (grateful that somebody has at least noticed her, and for this reason speaking warmly to Joachim, with a touch of concealed irritation against Vincent): Yes, I was reading Goethe. Why do you ask?

Joachim: Because, while you were reading Sterne, you must surely have asked yourself: what would he have said to this? Wouldn’t he have resented this confusion of heterogeneous bits and pieces? Wouldn’t he have despised what you were reading, on account of its raw, disordered state? Wouldn’t he have called your Sterne an amateur because he reproduces sentiments just as they are—as raw, unprocessed matter—and makes no effort to unify them, to give them form, however imperfect? Haven’t you read what he says about amateurs? Do you remember? “The amateurs’ mistake: to want to establish a direct link between imagination and technique.” Couldn’t this sentence be placed at the head of any critique of Sterne? And, if one had just
read such words—if the experience was still fresh in one’s mind—wouldn’t one find it difficult to become totally absorbed in Sterne’s formlessness?

She (a little uncertain, but trying to disguise it by assuming a particularly firm tone of voice): I’m sure there’s something in what you say, but Goethe didn’t . . . after all, that wasn’t quite . . .

Vincent: I think I know what you want to say; please let me complete your sentence for you. Goethe was never a dogmatist. “Let us be many-sided!” he said. It was this you wanted to refer to, wasn’t it?

She (nods a warm and grateful “Yes.” Once again, as before the interruption, her silence signifies agreement with Vincent, and both men are aware of it.)

Vincent (continues to speak): “Prussian beets are delicious, especially when served with chestnuts, yet these two noble fruits grow a long way from one another.” I could quote a thousand passages like this. —No! To speak against such delights in Goethe’s name will not do. Not against any delight, any pleasure. Nothing that enriches us, that can add something new to our life!

Joachim (a little ironically): You don’t say!

Vincent (whose irritation is coming more and more to the surface): As if I didn’t know—and I’m perfectly certain you know it too—what Sterne meant to Goethe, with what grateful affection he always spoke about him, as of one of the most important experiences of his whole life! Don’t you remember? Don’t you recollect the passage where he says . . . that the nineteenth century, too, must realize what it owes to Sterne and learn to see what it could still borrow from him? Don’t you remember? And what about the passage where he says: “Yorick Sterne’s was the most beautiful mind that was ever at work; whoever reads him must feel fine and free at once”? Don’t you remember?

Joachim (with an appearance of great calm and superiority): Quotations don’t prove anything. You know that as well as I do. I know that you could go on for another half an hour quoting to the same effect, and I’m sure you know that I could go on quoting in support of my point of view without ever leaving Goethe. Each of us could quote, for our own purposes, Goethe’s resigned remark that it is impossible to convince anyone—because false judgments are deeply rooted in everyone’s life—and that all one can do is to keep repeating the truth. And each of us could attack the other by quoting the equally resigned saying that our opponents think they have defeated us when they simply state their own views over and over
again and pay no attention to ours. No! Quotations support everything
and, in reality, are at the basis of nothing. And even if all the quotations of
world literature were against me—still I would know that in this argument
Goethe would be on my side. And even if not—Goethe could afford to do
many things which we can’t!—even then, my first reaction would remain
the right one: it is a fault of style to read Sterne after reading Goethe. I may
even be still more right than I realized at first: it is impossible to love Goethe
and Sterne at the same time. The man to whom Sterne’s writings mean a
great deal doesn’t love the real Goethe—or doesn’t properly understand
his own love of Goethe.

Vincent: I think it’s you who misunderstood Goethe, not I (looks at the
girl), not we. You love something about Goethe which he himself regarded
as secondary. But you’re right about one thing: let’s not argue in his name.
He can’t prove either of us right, he can only supply us with ammunition;
and in any case, it would, I think, be a matter of considerable indifference to
him which one of us was proved right. Come to think of it, it really doesn’t
matter a jot which of us is right.

To be right! To be wrong! What a trivial, unworthy issue! How little it
has to do with the things that really matter! Life! Enrichment! Suppose I
concede that you are right (I’m doing nothing of the sort, mind): suppose I
admit that we have been inconsistent, that the two subjects with which we
have occupied ourselves are not in harmony with one another—what then?
If we experience something even a little strongly, the very intensity of the
experience refutes any theory imposed from the outside. It is simply not true
that there can be a strong, decisive contradiction between two powerful
experiences. This is inconceivable because the essential lies precisely where
I am putting the emphasis—it lies in the power of the experience. The possi-
bility that both things can be a powerful experience in our lives excludes
the possibility of contradiction. The contradiction is somewhere else, out-
side the two, outside what we might know about them—in nothingness, in
theory.

Joachim (a little ironically): You could say that about anything. Every-
thing is . . .

Vincent (interrupts him vehemently): And why not? Where is unity,
where is contradiction? These are not properties of works or artists, they are
just the limits of our own possibilities. There is no a priori in the face of pos-
sibilities, and once the possibilities have stopped being possibilities—once
they have been realized—there is no criticism that can be addressed to
them. Unity means being together and staying together, and the fact of being together is the sole applicable criterion of truth. There is no higher instance than this.

Joachim: Don't you see that what you're saying, if one thought it through to its logical conclusion, would lead to complete anarchy?

Vincent: Not at all. Because there isn't any question here of thinking through or of logical conclusions, but of life. Not of systems, but of new, never recurring realities: Of realities where each successive one is not the continuation of the one before but something quite new, something that can in no way be foreseen or captured by theories of "thinking through to logical conclusions." The limit and the contradiction are only inside ourselves, just as the possibility of unity is inside ourselves. If we feel an insoluble contradiction anywhere, it means that we have arrived at the frontiers of our own self; if we speak of contradictions we are speaking of ourselves, not of outward things.

Joachim: That's certainly true. But we must never forget that there are frontiers within us which are not drawn by our own weakness or cowardice or lack of sensibility—as opposed to our capacity to receive impressions—but by life itself. And if a warning voice within us forbids us to cross these frontiers, it is the voice of life and not of fear in face of the richness of life. We feel that our life lies only within these frontiers, and whatever is outside them is mere sickness and dissolution. Anarchy is death. That is why I hate it and fight against it. In the name of life. In the name of the richness of life.

Vincent (sarcastically): In the name of life and of the richness of life! That sounds very fine so long as you don't try to apply your theory to anything concrete. As soon as you take it out of the lonely realm of eternal abstraction, it becomes a theory which does violence to the facts. Don't forget that we are talking about Sterne. Is it against Sterne that you are raising your objections—in the name of life and the richness of life?

Joachim: Yes.

Vincent: But don't you realize that that's just where Sterne is practically unassailable? That even if we deny him everything else in the world, we simply have to leave him this one thing—richness, fullness, life? I don't want to speak now of the wealth of small stylistic jewels in his work, nor of that teeming richness which is in every life-manifestation, however small, contained in his writings. I would only ask you to think of the exuberance of certain characters in *Tristram Shandy* and, when you think of these characters, to think also of the marvelous many-colored variety of their relationships
with each other. Heine admired Sterne as a brother of Shakespeare's, and Carlyle loved him as he loved nobody else except Cervantes. Hettner compared the relationship between the brothers Shandy to that between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza—and he thought the relationship in Sterne's book was the deeper one. Don't you see that because it is deeper, it's much richer? The Spanish knight and his fat squire stand side by side, like actor and scenery, and each is no more than a piece of scenery for the other. They complement each other, certainly, but only for us. A mysterious destiny has placed them next to one another and leads them at each other's side throughout their lives. Every life-experience of the one becomes a distorted image of all the life-moments of the other, and this continuous sequence of distorted images is the symbol of life itself—a distorted image of the hopeless inadequacy of the relationship between human beings. Very well, but can't you see that despite all this, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza have no relationship with one another, at least not as human beings? There is no interaction between them except of the kind that usually exists between figures in a picture: a linear and a coloristic one, but not a human one. Daumier was able to express their entire relationship, their entire character, in purely linear terms. It would not be too paradoxical to maintain that everything Cervantes wrote, all the adventures he invented for his heroes, all of it is only a commentary on these pictures, only an emanation of the idea, the aprioristic life—outdoing real life with its vigor and liveliness—which it was possible to express in this linear relationship. Don't you know what it means that this relationship between two destinies could be expressed in such a way? In this fact lies the monumentality and, at the same time, the limit of intensity of Cervantes' idea. It means that his characters have something mask-like about them: the one is tall and the other short, the one thin, the other fat; and the existence of each, being of such a kind, is absolute and excludes its opposite from the start. It means that the relativism, the fluctuation of their relationship is to be found only in life, in adventure, while the two men are as yet completely unbroken. Their gesture vis-à-vis life is unified, their character is mask-like, and there is no communion between them and no possibility of contact.

Sterne, on the other hand, puts relativity into his observation of human character. Both the Shandy brothers are Don Quixote and Sancho Panza at once. Their relationship renews itself at every moment, turns itself inside out and becomes its own self once more. Each of them fights battles with windmills, and each is the uncomprehending, sober spectator of the other's
fruitless and aimless battles. To reduce this relationship to any formula whatsoever is impossible. Neither of the Shandy brothers wears the typical mask of a constant attitude vis-à-vis the world. What they do, the way in which they live as the grandsons of the noble knight, all this appears secondary beside the grotesque and sublime inadequacy of their relationship. It has been said, not without justice, that Walter Shandy’s inability to cope with objects is the theoretician’s eternal impotence face to face with reality. I know that it is possible to say this, and it may be that no one has yet expressed the powerful symbolism of this situation with sufficient precision and depth. Yet what is really profound in this book are the relations between people, not any individual person. The really profound thing is the all-embracing multiplicity and richness of the circle, even if this circle is formed of only two or three persons. How rich—to speak of nothing else—is the relationship between these two brothers! Is it not moving to see how they are conscious of belonging together, how a sense of inner identification—at a depth inaccessible to thought—exists within them, how the great fear that this very thing will separate them, irrevocably and forever, quivers in their innermost souls? It is very moving when each tries, from time to time, to share the other’s quixotry, and at other times attempts to cure the other of it—the very content of his life. Yet there is no occasion when their relationship does not manifest itself in grotesquely comic fashion—generally with such force that the actual cause of the comedy, the profound inability of these two souls to meet, is heard only as a faint accompaniment to the great laughter. I don’t know if it has struck you how the play on words becomes a life-symbol in the world of Tristram Shandy—a symbol of the indicative, mediating nature of words, a symbol of the fact that words can convey an experience only if the listener has already experienced the same thing.

The brothers Shandy speak with one another, not to one another; each pays attention only to his own thoughts and receives the other’s words, but not his thoughts or feelings. Every word which distantly relates to the thoughts of one of them sets those thoughts in motion again, and the other proceeds in the same way. Here the play on words makes intersecting paths on which the two men, eternally looking for one another, cross each other unrecognized. Walter Shandy’s relationship with his wife is a similar one, full of the same tragically grotesque sorrows and melancholy joys. It is full of the philosopher’s sorrow over his wife, who never understands anything he is talking about, never even becomes aware that she cannot understand him,
never addresses any question to him, never becomes angry or excited over
him. The most complex intellectual apparatus cannot disturb this woman’s
tranquility, which makes her accept everything that the philosopher who is
her husband may say—and in consequence of which everything happens
just as she wants it to happen. The philosopher writes a book about how his
son should be brought up out of reach of his mother’s influence—and while
he is writing it, the mother, naturally, brings up her son. And think of his few
little satisfactions, sad and humorous at the same time—as for instance
when the wife, wanting to eavesdrop on the love scene between Uncle Toby
and Mrs. Wadman, tells her husband she is curious and asks him whether
she may listen, and the happy philosopher replies: “Call it, my dear, by its
right name and look through the keyhole as long as you will.” And then that
other great inadequacy, Uncle Toby’s great, primitive goodness that knows
nothing of life or men, Uncle Toby whose utter helplessness in face of all
reality causes the most painful confusion, the greatest misunderstanding
among quite simple, normal people. Yet in this night of mutual incompre-
hension there gleams a faint light of communion between two men—Uncle
Toby and his servant, Corporal Trim, who once served in the army under
him and who is as limited as he, yet whose passive, kindly nature, the nature
of a man born to serve others, allows him to accept all his former captain’s
nonsense without a hint of criticism. In the whole world only these two
fools understand one another—and then only because chance has endowed
them with the same fixed idea!

This is the world Sterne saw, this is the world whose immense richness
he glimpsed, its profound sadness and its absurdity, sadness and absurdity at
one and the same time and inseparable from each other. He saw the many-
sidedness of this (apparently only two-sided) circle—the tears that turn to
laughter, the laughter from which tears spring; the life that becomes true life
thanks only to this many-sidedness, and to which I can never do full justice
because I cannot observe the center of the circle from every point on its pe-
riphery at the same time. (Pause).

The girl (suddenly): How beautiful! The center . . . (Vincent looks at her,
awaiting the applause that is due to come; the girl blushes because she real-
izes that she has given herself away; in great confusion.) Yes—the theory of
the center—the Romantic theory of the center . . .

Joachim (is also embarrassed. But he is embarrassed because he feels
that, in view of all his convictions and especially in view of the existing
situation, he ought to argue the case of abstract form against Vincent, but he doesn't know how. Many ideas occur to him, but he senses that any argument, in face of such fine and sincere enthusiasm, would be petty, and is afraid of making himself thoroughly disliked by the girl if she, too, feels his arguments to be petty. But on the other hand he knows that for the self-same reason he must, after all, come out with his objections and must not allow a mood conjured up by Vincent to settle upon the three of them. And so he speaks softly and a little uncertainly, with many small pauses.) How beautiful. Yes . . . How beautiful . . . this novel would be . . . if it were like that . . . if it were really like that. What a great novel it might have been.

Vincent (to tell the truth, he is embarrassed too. He senses that there are justified counter-arguments somewhere in the air, and—because he knows Joachim—he can guess roughly from where the counterattack is going to come. However, he doesn't yet know for certain how the attack will be framed, and still less how he should defend himself. He vaguely senses that he got carried away, but is also aware that he must keep his enthusiasm intact, if only for the girl's sake. For these reasons he begins to talk in a very nervous manner, in short, disconnected sentences whose form suggests that he is throwing them away.): Might have been! Ridiculous! (He tries to keep the conversation off the problem of form for as long as possible.) You know perfectly well that I've quoted only a few details out of the infinite richness of the whole. Might have been! I've never heard such a thing!

Joachim (still uncertain and very cautious): Yes, of course . . . there are some things in Sterne's book which you haven't mentioned, and I'm sure you've had to leave out a great deal that might have increased your enthusiasm still further. (The girl, who had been listening to Vincent's speech with enthusiastic approval, now realizes that what he has been saying is, perhaps, a little dubious. She does not want to take sides at this stage, and tosses her head, offended because Joachim seems to be identifying her with Vincent simply because she has expressed support of the latter. Joachim interprets this gesture as agreement with himself and goes on speaking more boldly—yet the girl's irritation is directed at him because of the uncomfortable situation he has put her in.) But please don't forget that there are many other things which you have left unmentioned as well. You've left out many things whose absence—believe me—has done much to advance your argument.

Vincent (like Joachim, he has misinterpreted the girl's gesture. He now speaks more passionately than before, trying to recover his superiority
which threatens to slip through his fingers): I think I understand what you are hinting at, but—forgive me—your objection strikes me as extremely petty.

Joachim (interrupting him): I hadn't finished what I was trying to say...

Vincent (going on as if Joachim had not spoken): You were saying, more or less, "What a fine novel Tristram Shandy would have been if only Sterne had... written it." And that I had completely falsified Sterne by leaving out everything that might have damaged...

Joachim: But I...

Vincent: A moment, please. You are thinking, I'm sure, of Sterne's digressions, his episodes which seem to have nothing to do with the subject, his grotesque philosophical passages and much else of the same kind. I know. But how superficial it is to think that everything which at first glance seems out of place—perhaps only from a prejudiced, excessively theoretical point of view—must be disturbing and damaging to the greatness of a work! Remember that where you can see only confusion and disorder, there may be an intention which, although it may not be clear to you, is nevertheless profound and true. I think Sterne knew very well what he was doing, and he had his own theory of literary balance—admittedly, a rather individual one: "to keep up that just balance betwixt wisdom and folly," he writes in Tristram Shandy, "without which a book would not stand together a single year." I think I know the feeling which produced and encouraged this idea of balance. You may remember what I said about Sterne's many-sided view of human beings. Well, his method is the only one—or—what does it matter if it is the only one or not?—at any rate an excellent one of bringing such many-sided human beings together and, later, setting them in motion. The shortest way of defining the method would, I suppose, be this: a fact, and all around it a disordered host of associations which this fact evokes. A man steps forward, speaks a word, makes a gesture, or else we merely hear his name, and then he disappears again in a cloud of images, ideas, and moods that his appearance on the scene has produced. He disappears in order that all our thoughts may encompass him from every side; and although his reappearance destroys much of the many-sidedness which his earlier appearance had evoked, still the new event creates a similar richness, made even richer by the recollection of what has gone before. That is the novelist's state of mind when he has seen a significant gesture of his character's; the diarist's when he reflects upon his experiences and orders his memories; the state of mind of the true reader, the reader who reads more than the print, when he wants
to identify with the characters who are strangers to him. And such, in real life, is the technique whereby any man recognizes another.

*Joachim* (still speaks a little uncertainly, warming up only slowly as he goes along): There may be something in what you say. Yet I still feel the same as I did before: how fine this novel might have been! Because you’re doing the same thing again—you’re leaving things out to help Sterne and your own argument. You speak of Sterne as though your words did no more than reveal the immanent rhythm of his apparent chaos, and yet you are extracting from him only what can—with your help—acquire rhythm, and throwing the rest aside—perhaps without realizing it.

*Vincent* (nervously): That isn’t true.

*Joachim*: To give just one example—an important one (the many dead passages, already unreadable today, would support my point of view anyway): I once read in some English literary historian’s work that Sterne uses the word “humour” in the old, Elizabethan sense. And indeed, what else is the eternal theme of blindness and nonsense, the “hobby-horse” of each and every one of his characters, but the “humour” of the characters in Ben Jonson—the abiding quality of a man, so powerfully present in everything he does that it almost ceases to be a quality and it seems as though all his life-manifestations were merely the qualities or properties of this “humour”? Not a quality which a man possesses, but one which possesses the man. I could also say: the “humour” is a mask left over from an ancient, still wholly allegorical culture when life and drama were personified by types: a culture in which the whole nature of a man was compressed into an epigram, an inscription; and for as long as the play continued, he could never, not even for a moment, be anything but true to type. And, by the way, any mask—even one as threadbare and full of holes as the masks worn by Sterne’s characters—is still an obstacle to interaction between men: so that, in actual fact, Sterne didn’t go beyond Cervantes in this respect.

*Vincent* (triumphant): Now try to look objectively at what you’ve just said, I don’t mean Sterne’s position vis-à-vis Cervantes. The face and the mask are mutually exclusive in concept only; in reality they are simply two poles, and it’s quite impossible to tell exactly where the one ends and the other begins.

*Joachim* (quickly): But here it is possible!

*Vincent*: Well, as I said, that isn’t the important thing. But haven’t you noticed how everything you said about “humour” fits in with what I said about Sterne’s view of humanity? Except that you (a little ironically), *c’est*
votre métier, gave formal reasons for what I said, too. What you call “hu­mour” is the center around which everything is grouped—all the things that Sterne shows from an infinity of aspects in an attempt to do justice to life. I, too, had to presuppose the existence of such a center, even if I didn’t explicitly speak of it, for without one everything would simply have collapsed. And if I define it—as you’ve already done—then I make the connection even stronger and the substance of this world even richer, its matter still more varied. Because there is unchanging matter in this world, and continu­ally changing matter too; and we can separate the one from the other only in abstraction: just as a face is modeled, for the purpose of our vision, by the air that surrounds it, by light and by shade.

Joachim: I’ve already said that I don’t want to argue (Vincent smiles and Joachim pauses before continuing to speak). Nor am I arguing. (Vincent smiles again, but then his glance falls upon the girl; he sees that she is not smiling with him, and for a moment he feels: how far we are from her just now, both of us, and each as far as the other! He is suddenly afraid, and would like the whole conversation to stop. And so he listens to Joachim impa­tiently, waiting for an opportunity to express his new mood. But Joachim in the meantime goes on speaking.) There’s just one more thing I’d like to say. How wonderful it would be—everything we’re talking about—if it were so! If what you call Sterne’s method were really his method, if Sterne viewed his characters in the least consistently from the same perspective. Please don’t interrupt me just yet! Take the notion of “viewing from the same perspective” as far as you will, but while you do so, think of a particular kind of seeing—unless there is that, there can be no art—and then try to apply it. You’ll see how far you can get that way. And incidentally, Sterne himself knew it very well. When he speaks about Uncle Toby’s kind-heartedness, he senses that he can’t do it in the same style as when he describes Toby’s nonsense with the building of the fort and all the rest of his innocent lies and illusions—he senses that it is impossible to use his “hobby-horsical” method.

Vincent (speaking nervously and very impatiently. He would like to end the discussion no matter how, but cannot help, even so, wanting to find an argument which, he believes, will clinch the matter. Yet every word he speaks sweeps him along against his will, so that he finds it difficult to out-line his position in just a few sentences): Here you go again, running after Sterne’s sovereign extravagances with your accountant’s yardstick! Always the same yardstick! Sterne could afford to reveal a fault in his own
method—especially a fault which really wasn't one at all. Don't you feel, for all that you may say, how inexpressibly deep is the connection between these two traits of Uncle Toby's character? Sterne's sovereignty, which sees the thousand possibilities and limitations of a method all at once, is at this point playing with the natural limitations of his method, of any method. Sterne's sovereignty...

Joachim: Or, rather, his impotence...

Vincent (would have expected any interjection rather than this. His resolve to put an end to the debate is becoming weaker and weaker; he is becoming more and more deeply involved with the subject at issue, forgetting everything else. Now he says with strong, "objective" indignation): No, really! How can you say such a thing? Can't you distinguish between play and weakness, between throwing something away on purpose and letting something fall?

Joachim: Surely, but just because...

Vincent (interrupting): Well, I see the same refinement of naive certainty here as in all his compositions. To break up the unity simply so as to make it felt still more strongly—to make the unity felt at the same time as the things which are destroying it! To be able to play: that is the only true sovereignty. We play with things, but we remain the same and the things stay as they were. But both have been enhanced during the game and through the game. Sterne plays, always, all the time, with the gravest notions of man and destiny. And his characters and their destinies acquire incredible gravity through the fact that all his playing doesn't really shift them from the spot where they stand, it just washes against them like the sea against a cliff, yet the cliff stands firm in the play of the waves, and the more violently the waves break against them from all sides, the more we sense the cliff's solidity. And yet he is only playing with them! It is only his playful will that gives them this gravity; and although he cannot take away what he has once given, still his playful will is stronger than its children; he could pick them up and play with them, for all their weight, at any time, whenever he liked. And this immense force you call...

Joachim: Impotence, yes. The question to ask in such a case is: What is the writer playing with? And when, and why? Because there is no need to go any further, or because he can't go any further? Is the reason for playing really his inability to control his exuberant strength, or is the whole thing a clever cover-up for weakness? Because, don't you see, there's nothing in the world that covers up a disability more successfully than the playful
gesture of sovereignty. I can’t help it if I sense something like this in Sterne’s gesture—something that isn’t strength. The only raison d’être of play—the only time when play is born out of strength, not incapacity—is when it only seems to be play. Not until . . . not until everything has been said can we cry out: “Why all this talk?” and break off and begin playing. And I never have the impression that Sterne has really said everything—no, not in a single instance. When you turn my own example against me, you appear to be right—but it’s only an appearance. Because the unity you see in Toby’s character doesn’t exist, except perhaps in yourself. Perhaps it exists—I’m inclined to believe it—in Sterne’s vision, too. But I deny that it is present in the work. In life one can and should continually change the point of view from which one looks at things. Paintings indicate, in a sovereign manner, the place from which we must look at them; but once we have put ourselves in that place, it is all over with the painting’s sovereignty. If we have to look at one part from here and another part from there, that is no longer a sign of sovereignty but of impotence. And I feel impotence here, as I do in many other parts of Sterne’s works. And in many other respects as well.

Vincent: Such as?
Joachim: Such as the fact that his works never satisfy us.
Vincent: But that’s intentional, of course.
Joachim: Not always. I’d go further and say: not except in a few cases. Please don’t think I’m insensitive to the humor of such passages as, for instance, the one where Tristram arrives at last, after long preparations which continually intensify our suspense, at the grave of the unhappy lovers in order to wallow in tears and sentimental sensations—only to discover that the famous grave simply doesn’t exist. No, I’m thinking of passages like the one where—let me just give one small example—he introduces into a story begun but never concluded, very subtly and at great length, the episode of Corporal Trim’s love story with the Belgian nun—only to rob everything he has so carefully prepared of all its effect by a dreadfully weak and banal sentence. I feel the same about a great deal of Toby’s adventures with the widow Wadman—which Coleridge, for all that he admired and loved much of Sterne’s work, called “stupid and disgusting.” It’s the same everywhere: whenever he comes to the really decisive point, he drops the important thing and turns it into play. Because he can’t give it serious literary form, he pretends that he doesn’t want to.

Vincent: You forget that both books, as we have them today, are fragments. Who knows where Sterne would have taken the love story between
Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman if he had lived long enough to finish writing it?

Joachim: What I'm saying is that he couldn't have lived that long. His works were planned as fragments—if, that is, they were planned at all. Once he said it as a joke—Kerr quotes the remark in connection with Godwin—that he would continue his novel to infinity if only he could get a good contract from his publisher.

Vincent (during the last exchanges he has sensed Joachim's superiority; now he is waiting for his opponent to say something that will lay him open to attack. Therefore he can, as it were, hear only the words): Of course, if you read it like that, then everything is as you say, but then you're reading it quite differently and . . .

Joachim: You misunderstood me. I'm perfectly aware, believe me, that this was only a joke. But behind such jokes I see Sterne's gesture—the gesture I was speaking about a moment ago. All that Sterne does here—and this, I suppose, was always the technique of his (sarcastically) playful sovereignty—is to reveal his cynicism, but not in the area where he is really cynical. He reveals a weakness in himself and in his works, a weakness which, as you so rightly pointed out, isn't a weakness at all; but he does it only in order to divert our attention from other, real weaknesses that really are there. Not at all in order to make us feel his strength. He is superciliously cynical here because we mustn't see that he would be incapable of composition even if he wanted to compose.

Vincent (feels Joachim's advantage still more strongly, but doesn't want to admit defeat and therefore steers the discussion once more toward the crucial issues): You quoted a passage from Tristram Shandy a moment ago; but you forgot to say what Kerr wanted to demonstrate by it . . .

Joachim (has the impression that he has said all there was to be said, and feels—if only fleetingly—a strong distaste for all talk. While Vincent speaks, he looks attentively at the girl, whom he had quite forgotten during the last exchanges, and a mood overcomes him like Vincent's a little while ago; therefore he speaks indifferently): Because I didn't consider it important.

Vincent: But it's very important. The question here is what this composition that you insist on so much should really have expressed. Yet one can't argue over the events in the soul which call for expression; a discussion has meaning only if these events are agreed upon. Then one can argue over whether the artist succeeded in expressing them, and how and why. Kerr speaks of Romantic irony—you surely remember the passage—and quotes
Sterne once or twice in that context. He lists the principal stages in the development of Romantic irony, from Cervantes by way of Sterne and Jean Paul to Clemens Brentano—Romantic irony whose central thesis is that "the artist's arbitrary will suffers no law over itself." Sterne, by the way, expresses the same thought when he leaves two chapters out of the sequence—chapters eighteen and nineteen of the ninth volume—and then inserts them after chapter twenty-five, saying: "All I wish, that it may be a lesson to the world to let people tell their stories their own way." You called this arbitrary will "impotence" a moment ago, and I can understand that—from your point of view—you're bound to see it like that. But isn't there much that is doctrinaire in a point of view like yours, and much that does violence to the facts? It is possible that Sterne didn't want to compose because, in your sense, he was incapable of composition. But the question to ask here is whether he needed composition. Would it be important to him if his worldview, the immediate form of his life-manifestation, his way of feeling and expressing the world, consisted of boundless subjectivity and a Romantic, ironic play with all things? No writer and no work can do more than give us a reflection of the world in a mirror which is worthy of reflecting all the world's rays.

Joachim (would prefer to say nothing; but he hasn't quite managed not to listen, and on hearing the word "worthy" he has such a strong sense of the superiority of his arguments and of Vincent's implicit admission of that superiority that he is forced to interrupt him): Yes, a mirror that is worthy... 

Vincent: If we go back to the worldview, if we succeed in understanding anything at all as a worldview, then all your allegations of impotence lose their meaning. Then the only thing that matters is to feel the intensity of these forces, to enjoy and to love their effect. Sterne's sovereign play with all things is a worldview, don't you understand? Not a symptom but the mysterious center of everything, making all symbols clear, resolving all paradoxes in its symbolism. All romantic irony is a worldview. And its content is always the sense of self, intensified into a mystical sense of the All. Think of the Athenaeum fragments, of Tieck, Hoffmann, and Brentano. You must surely know those famous and beautiful lines from Tieck's William Lowell:

All beings are because we've thought them.
The world lies bathed in a dim twilight
And into its shadowy caverns
There falls a gleam that we bring with us.
Why does the world not break into a thousand fragments?
We are the destiny that keeps it whole.

Do you not see how sublimely everything that springs from such a life-sense is elevated to play—or reduced to play? All things are important, certainly, for the all-creating self can make something out of anything; but, for the same reason, because the self can create something out of anything, nothing is really important. All things have died, only their soul-possibilities remain alive, only those moments upon which the self, sole giver of life, has cast its rays. Don’t you see that such a sense of life can’t find any other adequate expression except for Sterne’s or that of his precursors and successors: Romantic irony, sovereign play? Play as religious worship, where every separate thing glows like a sacrifice upon the altar of the holy self; play as life-symbol, as the strongest expression of the only life-relationship that matters, the relationship between self and world? The only sovereign evaluation is this: I alone am really living in the entire world, and I play with all things because I can play with all things—because all I can do with the things of this world is to play. Do you not sense the melancholy arrogance inherent in such sovereignty—the resignation that lies concealed in this gesture of mastery over all things? Not even the ultimate sovereignty of the gesture with which Sterne sets the sources of the deepest gaiety flowing by striking the rock of our most ancient sorrow with the wand of his playfulness? Yes, it is true, a work of art can only give us a reflection of the world; but the poets of true subjectivity know it, and through their play they give us a truer image than those others, so earnest and so dignified, who claim to recreate real life among empty shadows.

Joachim: You’ve used the mirror twice as a symbol of the poet’s way of giving form to the world. But the first time you attached an epithet to the word, and by way of epithet I shall try to come back to Sterne, from whom your words have carried you such a long way.

Vincent: I’ve been talking about Sterne all along—him and nothing else!

Joachim: You wanted to eliminate any criticism of the artist’s starting point from our debate, yet quite involuntarily—I can quote your own words—you were compelled to admit the possibility of such criticism. You said the rays are reflected in a mirror which is worthy of reflecting all the rays. Worthy of reflecting—what does that mean? At this point I might ask
who is entitled to speak to us; for is it not true that here, too, there are boundaries and here too there is a question of worthy or not worthy?

Vincent: You're exaggerating the importance of the epithet I used.

Joachim: Perhaps you're underestimating its real significance.

Vincent (impatiently, aggressively): You listened to what I was saying much as the brothers Shandy listened to each other. You turn everything into a play on words because you hear only words—and opportunities for making a rejoinder.

Joachim (likewise a little impatiently): That's as it may be. Still, the only important question for me is this: which part of a human self is worthy to serve as a mirror for all the rays of our world?

Vincent: The whole self! Otherwise it has no sense. Otherwise what emerges as "style" or "form" is a falsification, a conscious or cowardly evasion.

Joachim: Yes, of course the whole self. The only question is, whose whole? I shall be very brief—and you may accuse me of being dogmatic. But I want to make myself extremely clear. Kant distinguishes between the "intelligible" and the "empirical" self. To put it in a nutshell: an artist may express his whole self—indeed he must do so—but only the "intelligible" self, not the "empirical" one.

Vincent: That's empty dogmatism.

Joachim: Perhaps not quite as empty as all that. Let us take a closer look at the justification for complete subjectivity—the necessity for it, if you like. Why is it there, and what is the use of it? Perhaps its only right to existence—you hinted at this yourself—is that, without it, we should never be able to discover anything of the truth. In other words, it is the only way to truth. But we must never forget that it is only the way to truth, not the goal to which that way leads; always and only the mirror which reflects the rays.

Vincent: How you do overwork that image!

Joachim: It's a good, meaningful image. With its help, I can perhaps say what I want to say still more clearly and precisely. The self is the mirror that reflects the world's rays for us, and—we did agree it should reflect all the rays, didn't we?

Vincent (impatiently): Yes, yes.

Joachim: Then—you see how my simple, almost trivial image illuminates the whole problem—then the question does not even arise which part of the mirror must reflect the rays: the whole, naturally! But the question
does arise how the mirror must be constituted in order to reflect all the rays and give a complete image of the world.

Vincent: It may be a distorting mirror.

Joachim: Possibly. But it must not be a clouded one. The highest power of subjectivity is that it alone can communicate real life-contents. But there are subjectivities—and in my opinion Sterne’s is one of them—which, instead of performing this essential act with supreme intensity, thrust themselves as an obstacle between me and these life-contents, so that any true and important subjectivity is lost—precisely through them and because of them. Thackeray . . .

Vincent: Surely you don’t mean to quote Thackeray?

Joachim: I can well imagine that you don’t care for what he wrote about Sterne; I find much of his petty-bourgeois moralizing displeasing. But I think that’s less important than the fact that he and I agree on this particular point. “He fatigues me,” writes Thackeray, “with his perpetual disquiet and uneasy appeals to my risible or sentimental faculties. He is always looking in my face, watching the effect.” Here you have it, put quite precisely—the thing that so annoys me about Sterne and similar writers. Their lack of tact, their absence of any sense of what is really valuable—even in their own ideas, or rather least of all in their own ideas. They think that because there’s something in their soul which is important and interesting because of its life-communicating power, therefore every accidental and uninteresting expression of their accidental and uninteresting nature is equally important and interesting. They push their way in between their own vision and our astonishment; they spoil their greatness with the petty things they add; compromise their depth with shallow confessions; destroy the immediacy of their effect with their effect-anticipating grin.

Vincent (tries to say something).

Joachim (going on quickly): I know what you’re thinking. But I’m not speaking now of the few passages where Sterne’s pushing himself forward is symbolic—“a symbol of the great play,” as you called it. I’m speaking of a thousand other passages where it stands in the way of the effect his symbols ought to produce. Not of individual passages so much as of the whole stylistic and ethical demoralization which results from his attitude. His continual coquetry has eaten into every image, every metaphor; not a single line he wrote is free of the poison. His observations, his experiences, his descriptions: I always have to think of the text Nietzsche proposed as a memento for psychologists: “Beware of cheap psychology! Never observe in order to
observe! It creates a false optic, a kind of squint: it leads to falseness and exag- geration. Experience as wanting-to-experience is no good. Don’t look at yourself when you are experiencing something. An eye that does that is an evil eye.” This cheapness, don’t you see, this deep vulgarity is what I sense in all Sterne’s writing and especially in Yorick’s letters to Elisa. And this isn’t just an aversion to Sterne the man—although this, too, I would consider entirely justified—it is the most profound criticism that can be addressed to the artistic quality of his works. They are inorganic, fragmentary. Not because he couldn’t complete them but because he couldn’t distinguish between value and non-value anywhere, and never chose between the two. He didn’t compose his works because he lacked the most elementary prereq uisite for composition, the ability to choose and evaluate. Sterne’s writings are a muddy flood of unselected matter. They are formless because he could have carried on to infinity, and his death meant only the end of his works but not their completion. Sterne’s works are formless because they are extensible to infinity; but infinite forms do not exist.

Vincent (quickly): Oh yes they do!

Joachim: How’s that?

Vincent (would really like the argument to end, but he cannot let the last remarks pass unchallenged, and so he tries at least to draw the girl into the conversation): You will, of course, find what I am about to say too paradoxical; but you (turning to the girl) will surely understand me.

The girl (is grateful that somebody is paying some attention to her once more, but is afraid of laying herself open to attack in some way; in order nevertheless to say something, she interjects): You mean the endless melody, don’t you?

Vincent (is slightly embarrassed because he finds this remark somewhat meaningless): Yes, that’s it, more or less.

Joachim (completely absorbed in the discussion, he finds the girl’s remark totally devoid of meaning, and in his “objective” passion he exclaims a little too quickly, at the same time as Vincent): The endless melody?!

The girl (is hurt).

Vincent (naturally notices this at once and promptly turns the situation to his own advantage). Yes—the endless melody as a life-symbol—that was what you meant, wasn’t it?

The girl: Of course.

Vincent: As a symbol of reaching out for the infinite, of the boundlessness of life and its immense richness. The endless melody is only a metaphor
here, but a profound one, for it hints at things which ten times as many words could not express. Still, I shall try to explain what we mean by it.

*Joachim* (has realized immediately after his last interjection how clumsy and wounding it was; Vincent's "we" makes him wince, but a glance at the girl's face tells him that to protest would by now be useless, and he says nothing).

*Vincent:* As I said, if the notion of artistic form has any real meaning, then I have already defined the nature of Sterne's form. Now I should add one more thing: form is the essence of whatever has to be said, condensed to a point where we are conscious only of the condensation and scarcely of what it is a condensation of. Perhaps a still better way of putting it would be this: form gives a rhythm to what has to be said, and the rhythm becomes—later, afterwards—something abstractable, something that can be experienced by itself, so that some people feel it to be—always afterwards—as the eternal *a priori* of all content. Yes, form is the intensification of the ultimate feelings, the strongest feelings, to independent significance. There is no form that cannot be reduced to such ultimate, primitively sublime, simple feelings; no form whose every property—every law, as you would have it—could not be traced back to the specificities of those feelings. But every such feeling—even those aroused by tragedy—is a feeling of our power and of the world's infinite richness, a "tonic" feeling as Nietzsche would say. The only thing that distinguishes different art forms from one another is the fact that the occasions upon which they reveal this power are different. To list and arrange these feelings in some order would be a futile game. For us here it is enough to know that there are works which directly convey this kind of reflection, this metaphysically profound and powerful realization of life, whereas most works of literature can convey it only indirectly. In such works, everything grows quite simply from the feeling that the world is many-colored and infinitely rich, and that we—to whom it is given to make all its richness our own—are infinitely rich, too. The forms born out of such feeling do not convey the great order, but the great multiplicity; not the great cohesion of the whole, but the wonderful many-colored richness of every nook and cranny of the whole. For this reason such works are direct symbols of the infinite: they themselves are infinite. Infinite variations of endless melodies (he looks at the girl), as you said (the girl returns his glance gratefully). Their form is not the result of inner cohesion, as is the case with all other works, but the blurring of their boundaries in a distant mist, like sea-coasts on the horizon: although the boundaries belong to our vision
rather than to the works themselves. For, like the feeling from which they spring, they have no boundaries. And our inability to accept life without any connections is what creates the connections between their various parts—not their airy, playful lightness. They, like the feelings from which they spring, are held together by no firmer link than the fugitive images of our dreams. These are the works of true unbrokenness and freshness, of a richness intoxicated by itself. The writings of the early Middle Ages were of such a kind. Adventures, adventures, and more adventures: and when the hero, after a thousand adventures, died at last, his son lived on to multiply the endless adventures. Nothing held this endless series of adventures together except a communion of feeling, a communion of experience, an infinitely powerful experiencing of the world's many-colored richness expressed in a varied series of endless adventures.

Sterne's works, too, were born from such feelings. Yet he did not inherit the blissful sense of richness of a naively poetic world; what he created was done in the very teeth of his unpoetic, poverty-stricken epoch. That's why everything in him is so conscious and so ironic: because the possibility of a naive feeling, spontaneously making life and play equivalent to each other, was no longer there. Friedrich Schlegel used a beautiful expression to describe this form: he called it "arabesque." And when he said that the humor of Sterne and Swift was "the nature poetry of the upper classes in our era of history," he showed that he had recognized the roots of this kind of poetry and its position in the life of today.

Joachim: There's certainly much truth in what you're saying; but think of what Friedrich Schlegel says directly after the sentence you've just quoted. Quite apart from the fact that he hadn't a particularly high opinion of the arabesque form.

Vincent: Well, in some respects he was still a dogmatist in defense of the old forms.

Joachim: Not any longer when he wrote this. The more important thing, however, is that he rates Jean Paul higher as an exponent of this form, whatever he may have thought of it—"because his imagination is much more morbid and therefore more bizarre and fanciful." Perhaps I'm interpreting this judgment correctly if I say that Sterne's form resembles Jean Paul's, but in Jean Paul the form is more organic to the material, to the innermost nature of his view of the world and of human relationships; that is why his lines can meander more boldly, more richly, more lightly than in Sterne, and yet the picture as a whole is more harmonious. You yourself said that Sterne's
world is made up of a variety of materials, and this multi-material character is perhaps the real reason for the disturbing, annoying quality of his writing. Every "now" in Sterne refutes both the past and the future, every gesture of his compromises his words, and his words spoil the beauty of the gestures. I am thinking of the violent dissonances of material—of course I can only point to them very briefly. Every character, every relationship in *Tristram Shandy* is so top-heavy, made of such heavy stuff, so lacking in grace, that the contours, which are stylized into lightness, continually contradict what is inside them by their arabesque quality. It's true you said that the illusion of heaviness is intensified by the author's playfulness. That might be significant if heaviness were a goal and if this contrast increased the grotesque quality of the work. But we know that this is not so. We feel at every step that the one compromises and weakens the other—the heaviness weakens the arabesque, the gracefulness interferes with the natural *gravitas* of the work. This disharmony is perhaps still more apparent in the *Sentimental Journey*, although the reasons for it are much subtler there. There, the contradictions within each single sentence spring from the dissonance in the sentiment which underlies the whole book. In a word, the content of the *Sentimental Journey* is the playful enjoyment of sentiment, an amateur approach to sentiment if you will. But such an approach is a *contradictio in adiecto*: one can conceive of an amateur approach to sensation, perhaps, but not to sentiment. By "amateur approach to sentiment" I mean that all one's inner reactions to things are so distanced that the fitting of these things into bizarre arabesques becomes the natural form of expression, or that one's moods are so morbidly over-refined that they can bend over from left to right and back again of their own accord. Yet Sterne's sentiments are simple and often quite ordinary, even vulgar. They are healthy; there's nothing over-refined or morbid about them. But that is how he sees them, and he fits them into his life as though they were like that; and so he robs them of their fine, healthy strength without being able to endow them with the subtle flexibility of morbid sensations. However, the dissonance in the *Sentimental Journey* is less marked, and I can understand the French who prefer it to *Tristram Shandy*, for all the superb ideas contained in the latter.

*Vincent:* Yes, but Jean Paul thought highly of *Tristram Shandy*, and he was right. Of course the *Sentimental Journey* is the gate through which we arrive at a deep understanding of Sterne—and through which, heavily laden with the treasures of his kingdom, we return into real life. For whatever we
may say about the purely artistic value or lack of value of these works—and
I don’t suppose we shall ever convince one another on this issue—the rea­son why they really matter to us is, after all, that they show us a way into life,
a new way toward the enrichment of our life. Sterne said himself where this
way leads to; in a letter in which he discussed A Sentimental Journey he
wrote: “My design in it was to teach us to love the world and our fellow crea­tures better than we do.” If we don’t read this as a purely programmatic
statement but consider it in terms of the actual result—the overwhelmingly
powerful effect of his writings—then Sterne as an educator becomes far
more important to us than the “aesthetic value” or the “significance in terms
of literary history” of his works. Richness as an ethic, knowing how to live,
knowing how to draw life from everything that comes to hand, that is what
these writings teach us. “I pity the man,” he wrote, “who can travel from Dan
to Beersheba and cry: ‘Tis all barren; and so it is; and so is all the world to
him who will not cultivate the fruits it offers.” All Sterne’s works proclaim
this, with a preacher’s enthusiasm and conviction, with the ever-recurrent
gesture of opening up the world; everything he wrote proclaims such a wor­ship of life. Here, the difference between great and small, heavy and weight­less, amusing and dull, ceases to have any meaning; distinctions between
materials or qualities—like those you spoke of a moment ago—become
meaningless because everything meets and merges in the unity of great, in­tense experience; but without such experience—as mere possibility, that
is to say—there is nothing, and everything is irrelevant to the same degree.
Life is made up of moments; every moment is so filled with the energy of life
that, beside its living reality, things of which we know only that they once
were and may one day be again, are lost in empty nothingness—things that
merely bind and oblige us, but do not fecundate our lives. Sterne’s is the
most powerful affirmation of life, despite and against everything. There isn’t
a “No” anywhere in the world that could begin to measure itself against
this “Yes.” Sterne’s “Yes” is always addressed only to moments, and there is
no moment which could not give him—everything. “Were I in a desert,” he
says, “I would find out where within it to call forth my affections.” Remem­ber when he arrives in Paris and realizes that he hasn’t got a passport? He
knows that unless he can get hold of one within a few hours he may be put in
the Bastille for months. Remember how he goes out in search of a passport?
And all the things that happen to him in the process of looking for it? How
much he experiences, and how every experience matters more to him than
what he is searching for? In the end, it falls quite accidentally into his lap and is of no more importance to him than all the rest has been. Do you not sense here that all the digressions and excursions that we find in his writings are for him a philosophy of life? Life is only a way: we do not know whither it leads: and what do we know of its wherefore? The way itself is value and happiness, the way is beautiful and good and enriching. We should accept every digression with joy, no matter what has occasioned it or why. If I consider the characters in *Tristram Shandy* and their destinies from this point of view, they seem to acquire a depth which is quite new: because everything that separates them from each other, everything that hurls them blindly, tragically, against reality makes their lives infinitely richer than reality could ever do. Their imaginings, their castles in the air, their fantasies, their play—these are life, and everything else, compared with which we normally call their life "unreal," appears empty and schematic. That deep alienation that exists between men is turned into jubilant joy, because what separates men gives them life—because any other communicable life would be empty, schematic, devoid of content.

Joachim: You're wrong! Wrong! I deny that there can be an ethic of moments, and I deny that the life-form you have just described can be really rich. (A little more calmly.) I'm thinking of Sterne—whom you've once again forgotten—and I deny that he has real richness or that the chaotic disorder of his experience is enriching to us. No! Chaos in itself is never richness. That which creates order springs from roots in the soul just as deep as chaos, and therefore only a soul in which both—chaos and order, life and abstraction, man and destiny, mood and ethic—are present in equally powerful degrees can be complete and for that reason rich. Only when they are present together, when they grow together organically into an inseparable, living unity at every single moment, only then is a man really a man and his work a real totality, a symbol of the world. And only in the works of such men is chaos really chaos—where every deep, fundamental conflict grows organically together into meaningful unity because everything in the prisons of schematic ideas is really alive and vital, because, under the ice of the abstractions, everything is glowing and seething with life. If chaos alone is present in a work, then the chaos itself becomes weak and powerless because it is present only in a raw state, empirical, static, unchanging, without movement. Only contrast brings things really to life; only constraint brings forth real spontaneity, only in something that is formed do we feel the metaphysic of formlessness; only then do we feel that chaos is a world principle.
Ethics! The order that comes from the outside! The law imposed upon us, the law we cannot transcend! You speak about it as though it did nothing but shrivel up the soul. You do so in Sterne’s name, it’s true, and there you are right—he felt it to be so, but only out of an instinct of self-preservation, the self-defense of a weak man who is wary of making any value-judgment because he is afraid that, were he even a little honest, all his feelings and experiences would seem too light—even to himself. Such men evade all constraint because any constraint would stifle them once and for all; they run away from all battles because they know they will be defeated. In the lives of such men everything is of equal importance because they are not capable of choosing the really important things, of experiencing them through to the end. Sterne’s whole life is an episodism of the soul. It’s true that many things have a more powerful effect in his works than in most others, but all really great things are reduced to a thousandth of their size. Remember—to quote only the most obvious example—that in the diaries of his journey through France there is everything... except Paris. This is not an attempt to stand accepted values on their head, not a pre-figuring of Trésor des Humbles; the great things are not small because the small ones are great; no, this is anarchy, the anarchy of sheer incapacity. The contours of the great things are dimly visible through Sterne’s episodes, as through a dirty window—but they remain dim, they are neither grasped nor rejected. Things are the same to him as they are to those who do make value-judgments—it’s only that some things are too strong, too big for him. Yet real richness lies in the ability to evaluate, just as true strength lies in the strength to choose—in that part of the soul which is free from episodic moods, the ethical part. It lies in determining certain fixed points for life. This strength, with sovereign power, creates distinctions between things, creates a hierarchy of things; this strength, which projects a goal for the soul out of the soul itself and thus gives solid form to the soul’s contents. Ethics or—since we’re speaking of art—form, unlike the moment and the mood, is an ideal outside the self.

Vincent (a little superior and sarcastic): That’s the view of Gregers Werle.
Joachim: I wouldn’t deny it for a moment.
Vincent: You should never forget that there’s something—forgive me—foolish and ridiculous about Gregers.

Joachim (vehemently): But only because he tries to make his ideal demands prevail against a nonentity, a Hjalmar! And even so, how much richness and strength there is in him, for all the outward absurdity! And
how terrible the inner poverty of the richness you have described! I suppose you take it for irony when Sterne says somewhere, speaking of himself, how wretched his conflicts make him—conflicts into which he would never have been flung by worthier sentiments. But try to remember the letter in which he confesses so frankly and sorrowfully to the great inner bankruptcy of his anarchic sentiments: "I have torn my whole frame into pieces by my feelings." He tore his work to pieces, not only by his feelings, but also by his ideas, his moods, his jokes. He diminished his own greatness and made his life pitiful and worthless. You know very well what his life was made up of—an endless series of love affairs begun in play, abandoned in play, never enjoyed and never suffered through to the end; nothing but platonic flirtations, tender and feeble, delicate and frivolous, sensitive and sentimental. Such was the content of his life: beginnings that could never have a continuation, that came and vanished without trace, never advancing him even by an inch. Episodes that always remained the same, always finding and leaving the same man, weak, witty, and lachrymose, capable neither of really living nor of really giving form to life. Only the ability to apportion value gives a man strength to grow and to develop—only the ability to create order, to make a beginning and an end; for only an end can be the beginning of something new, and only by constant beginnings can we grow to greatness. In episodes, however, there is neither beginning nor end, and a mass of disordered episodes is not richness but a lumber-room. And the impressionism which produces them is not a strength but an incapacity. (A long and rather awkward silence. The girl has hardly listened to the objective contents of what has been said throughout, but precisely for this reason she has sensed very strongly the personal element in it—the element of courtship. Yet just because she senses only this half-unconscious content, she misunderstands both men and puts more into their words than is there. This personal interpretation of the whole argument expresses itself particularly in her irritation with Joachim, whom she finds exceptionally tactless and, at the end, offensive. Vincent, too, has been conscious of the personal aspect of what has been said toward the end, although quite differently; he feels it is an expression of Joachim's view of the world, and in it he senses a strength greater than his own. It seems almost impossible to him that the girl should not have noticed this. Both men have thrown themselves into the debate so wholeheartedly that Vincent feels his defeat—and at this moment he feels very much defeated—to be a defeat all along the line, and he does not dare to speak again until he knows how the land lies. For a moment he feels so
badly beaten that best of all he would like to go away and give up the struggle. Joachim interprets the silence still more incorrectly. He expected a very strong reply from Vincent, whom he has attacked personally and perhaps unjustly. The fact that no reply is forthcoming makes him think that he is wasting his time, since nobody is listening to him anyway. The feeling becomes so strong, especially as he feels the girl to be very hostile toward him, that he decides to go. And that, having offered some perfunctory and transparent excuses, is what he does. After the strained friendliness of the farewells, another silence falls between the two young people who remain behind, and once more each of them misunderstands the other’s silence. Vincent now sees the absent Joachim still more as the winner of the argument, and is afraid that the girl is thinking the same. At the same time he feels that something must happen, and promptly. His glance falls suddenly upon the book, and he picks it up with nervous indecision. This discussion has quite spoilt our pleasant reading. How sterile any discussion must seem compared with the living beauty of life! (The girl looks at him; he does not notice.) Listen to this! (He begins to read, in a voice which, now, is very warm and a shade too sentimental. He would like to use Sterne to recapture the mood of the first half-hour, which the discussion has destroyed. The girl is at first unable to suppress her disappointment that literature is once more about to occupy the center of the stage. But she manages to adjust herself, and tries to disguise her nervousness by extreme attention. Vincent is very nervous too, and so, when he reaches a passage which is really quite without style, he mistakes the girl’s badly disguised restlessness for agreement with the absent Joachim. He bangs the book shut.) That really is an unsatisfactory passage. (He starts turning the pages more and more nervously, and finally starts reading again, with a certain defiance, at the most sentimental place of all—the meeting with Maria of Moulins. The same play of disappointment and misunderstanding. He watches the effect of every word he reads with anxious attention, senses the falseness and weakness of Sterne’s sentimentality more and more strongly, and finally puts the book down in irritation, stands up and starts walking nervously up and down the room.) It’s no good. This discussion has completely spoiled our reading. I can’t read any more today.

She (very sentimentally): What a pity. It was so lovely—wasn’t it?

He (suddenly understanding the situation, very sentimental): Oh yes, it was. (In a soft voice.) We’ll go on another time—all right?

She: All right...
He (standing very close behind her; softly): Another time . . . (Suddenly bends down and kisses her.)

She (her transfigured face shows her relief that the thing for which the whole argument was only a highly unnecessary preparation has happened at last; and she returns his kiss).

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