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Point blank — or fulfilling Tristram’s command of ‘painting’ on the blank page

It took a Frenchman (presumably) to order the matter of the blank page differently, if not better, than most readers — with neither a drawing nor a doodle, but a twenty-nine line description of a female, hand-written in ‘pen and ink’.¹

This can be found in a 1785 copy of *Suite et fin de la vie et des opinions de Tristram Shandy* kept in the library of the city from whence originated a future admirer and imitator of Sterne. The city is Besançon and the admirer Charles Nodier (born 1780), the author of *Histoire du roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* (1830) and of a few other earlier shandean variations such as *Moi-Même* or *Le dernier chapitre de mon roman.*² Tempting as it is to ascribe the interesting copy to the famous author, no such conclusion can be drawn from the bibliographic data presently available. Moreover, the hand-written text hardly compares with Nodier’s self-debunking humour and textual games.

The book is the third volume of a set of four, half-bound in sheep, with decorative paper boards, from the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century.³ The first two volumes are a 1777 Neuchâtel edition of Frénais’s *La vie et les opinions de Tristram Shandy.* Books Three and Four consist of Griffet de la Baume’s translation (on the title-page ‘M.D.L.B.’), which prolongs *Tristram Shandy* with fragments of sterneana he had also translated (he was taken in by *The Koran’s* claim of being by Sterne): ‘Mélanges, Lettres, Pensées, Bon-mots & Mémoires’. It was published by Buisson, with the imprint ‘A Londres, 1785’ (fig. 29).⁴ This *Suite et fin* was not reprinted as frequently as de Bonnay’s *Suite de La vie et des opinions de Tristram Shandy,* also published in 1785.⁵ Because de la Baume transposes references or names into a Swiss context and published his 1784 *Nouveau Voyage en France de Sterne* in Switzerland, I wonder if this translation may have targeted readers in Switzerland and French provinces under Swiss influence. Suggestions on this point would be very welcome.⁶

The representation of Widow Wadman provided by this literal reader of *Tristram Shandy* is fairly elaborate (figs. 30, 31, here transcribed):

*La personne insensible, le penchant d’abord une caresse plus vif incarnèrent son beau visage brillans et des yeux brillants qui me servirent m’air d’un lieu pas ses lèvres soleils, il serait occasion pour au mont liban puis-je vous dire de ses regards Mr — Shandy.*
La personne dont je parle était faite pour émouvoir le cœur le plus insensible, le plus sec, le moins susceptible de sentiments tendres. Elle avait d'abord une carmination si éblouissante, des joues si agréablement colorées du plus vif incarnat, un teint d'une blancheur si pure qu'on eût pris volontiers son beau visage, pour un mélange artistement combiné des lys les plus brillants et des roses les plus fraîches que renferme le parterre de fleurs. Je me serais même assez volontiers de cette comparaison si elle n'avait pas l'air d'un lieu commun. C'est pour la même raison que je n'assimilerai pas ses lèvres au corail, ses dents aux perles de l'orient et ses yeux à des soleils !. il serait impie d'employer les termes de la sainte écriture en pareille occasion pour comparer son col au tronc majestueux des cèdres et sa gorge au mont liban .. je ne comparerai pas !.. Que ne puis-je peindre ? que ne puis-je vous donner quelque notion imparfaite de la vivacité séduisante de ses regards .. de la douceur de sa voix .. de la noblesse de sa taille .. oh! Mr — Shandy .. il n'y a pas assez de deux pages.

Translation:

The person I am speaking of was made to move the driest, the most insensible heart, the least open to tender sentiments. First she had such a radiant bloom, cheeks of such an agreeable rosiness, a complexion of such a pure white that one could have taken her beautiful face for an artistic combination of the brightest lilies and the freshest roses contained in Flora's parterre. I would even be quite happy to use this comparison if it did not smack of the commonplace. For the same reason I will not liken her lips to coral, her teeth to the pearls of the East and her eyes to suns!. It would be impious to use the words of the sacred Bible on such an occasion to compare her neck to the majestic trunk of the cedar and her bosom to Mount Lebanon.. I will not compare!.. Why can I not paint? Why can I not give you some imperfect notion of the appealing liveliness of her gaze? Of the sweetness of her voice .. of the nobleness of her figure .. oh, Mr — Shandy .. two pages are not enough.

This answers cues from translator de la Baume which expatiate on Sterne's text. 'Deux pages de papier blanc', amounting to half a recto and a complete verso, and invite writing more than drawing. A succession of manuscript words and punctuation marks makes the most of the space provided, whereas a picture would waste half a page and not be visualised simultaneously with the printed text. The Becket and de Hondt 1762 layout leaves just a few vacant lines at the bottom of the left-hand page (standard printing practice to indicate a break in the text, as before a new
chapter) with a blank right-hand page. The French edition does respect
the presence of the page number in the usual format, which indicates that
whatever is on it is part of the text, but cannot fit the typographic game on
one single opening, which good editions of *TS* always manage to do.8

Moreover, the word order of 'peins à ton esprit cette veuve' suggests a
more abstract representation than Sterne's ambivalent 'paint her to your
own mind'. The literal sense of 'painting' implies colour, which is at odds
with 'pen and ink'.9 De Bonnay, the other translator, followed Sterne's
text more closely ('Mais je veux que vous fassiez vous-même son portrait.
[...] peignez la à votre fantaisie') but the blank space allotted by publisher
Volland consists of eight lines at the bottom of the even-numbered page
and only thirteen lines on its verso (243-44, figs. 32, 33). The ornament
at the bottom of page 244 which fills in the blank before the new chapter (as
in more than twenty other instances) is hardly sufficient to make the reader
realise that its absence on page 243 signifies the space is his. Although the
De Bonnay narrator puts everything that is needed at the disposal of the
reader ('Voici une plume, de l'encre & du papier'), rather than making
the reader partake in the gathering of the implements and thus 'halve
this matter amicably' ('- call for pen and ink - here's paper ready to your
hand'), this edition provides a paltry blank page. De la Baume respects
Sterne's use of the imperative ('demande de l'encre et une plume') and
suggests that the paper ('je laisse ici deux pages de papier blanc') is to be
filled like the chair the narrator vacates: 'voilà ma chaise ... Assieds-toi'.
Sterne's '— here's paper ready to your hand. — Sit down, Sir' reads more
like an invitation to be seated by Tristram's side and 'paint' the widow
while the reader visualizes the two producers of the work sharing a table
and male suggestiveness thanks to the graphic combination of dashes
and letters: '— Sit down Sir'. De la Baume leaves out any indication of
gender but intimates greater familiarity with the reader than de Bonnay
through his use of 'tu'. By leaving his place to the narratee, this narrator
gives him more freedom than does the original Tristram.

The owner (?) of the copy now in Besançon filled this space to the
full, and even complained that it was not enough: 'il n'y a pas assez de
deux pages'. After taking up the role of the first-person narrator at the
beginning of his stunt ('la personne dont je parle'), he relinquishes it at the
bottom of the second page by paying allegiance to Tristram with shandean
punctuation, as if to ask for leniency: 'oh! Mr — Shandy...'. Punctuation
does not play a great role in the rest of the performance. What can be
viewed as vaguely shandean is the ironic self-reflexive judgement ('je me
servirais meme assez volontiers de cette comparaison si elle n'avait pas l'air
d'un lieu commun') and the repeated use of paralipsis in what may be a

**NOTES**

1 David A. I. 128-158,
162-68, re-
See also el-
2 Anne Ban-
Twentieth
Peter de ·
41-48.
3 Besançon
Suite et fin a
pensées, bon-
Troisième
p. 337- 24
Waille, R.
The writer moreover plays on the collapsing of writing, drawing and painting when he laments his inability to do the latter or indeed to represent the female character in any medium. He even increases the range of possible means of expression by first referring to speech (‘la personne dont je parle’) with the same kind of concrete/abstract ambivalence as Tristram’s ‘paint’, while ending with a reference to the book as such with its ‘deux pages’.

One possible explanation for this writing on the blank page could stem from what seems to have been a French habit. According to historian Philippe Martin, it was customary for people from all walks of life to write in their pious books, appropriating margins and blank spaces for commentary notes, marginia occasionally devoted to everyday life rather than to devotion, or ‘invasive notes,’ thereby turning the book into a new object.11 The person who wrote the description in the blank space left by ‘Tristram’ may have been familiar with such a practice and thus ‘halve plume’) and ‘Assieds-toi’. The person who wrote the description in the blank space left by ‘Tristram’ may have been familiar with such a practice and thus ‘halve plume’) and ‘Assieds-toi’. The person who wrote the description in the blank space left by ‘Tristram’ may have been familiar with such a practice and thus ‘halve plume’) and ‘Assieds-toi’. Whether this explanation is akin to Walter’s ‘scratch[ing] some better sense’ with a penknife (TS, 3. 37. 272) or to MacNally’s variation on button-holes12 is best left to the reader’s sagacity.

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NOTES


4 See my 'A Bibliography of Sterne in French', The Shandean, 12 (2001), 103-105.

5 Lana Asfour, 'Movements of Sensibility and Sentiments: Sterne in Eighteenth-Century France', The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe, 21. A facsimile of the title-pages of Frénaïs (1776) and de Bonnay (1785) can be seen in The Shandean, 6 (1994), 66.


7 If a copy of the 1762 edition is not at hand, pp.146-147 can be viewed at http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/exhibns/month/oct2000.html

8 The black pages are also wrong, being on the same opening rather than recto-verso to suggest a slab, and the marbled pages were expunged out the text by Frénaïs.

9 OED: t.a. 'to make (a picture or representation) on a surface in colours [...]’; b. 'to depict or describe in words; to set forth as in a picture; to present vividly to the mind’s eye, call up a picture of.' The last example for t.c., 'said of writing (as a kind of painting)', is dated 1638.

10 Such a reader had probably read Le Tourneur's Shakespeare (1776-83).

11 Philippe Martin, Une religion des livres: 1640-1850 (Paris: Cerf, 2003, Collection Histoire religieuse de la France), 109, 524: 'les intrusions du lecteur dans le contenu même de son ouvrage en y incluant des commentaires, en y raturant des passages, en inféchissant le sens de certaines phrases.' Serendipity in the guise of a paper heard at a conference in Mulhouse University presided over my coming upon this interpretation.