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No Island Is an Island
FOUR GLANCES AT ENGLISH LITERATURE IN A WORLD PERSPECTIVE

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François Bauduin had written in his De institutione historiæ universæ: "And yet, in order to understand it, we have to preserve the recollection of those who are usually labelled barbarians. Are we French, British, German, Spanish, or Italian? If we want to speak about ourselves, we must not ignore the history of Franks, of Angles, of Saxons, of Goths, of Lombards." In his Defence of Ryme Daniel revived, from an entirely English angle, the course sketched by Bauduin.

At the beginning of this century Daniel's Defence of Ryme was regarded as an anticipation of romanticism. We can easily guess the source of such an anachronistic evaluation: Daniel was anticlassic, therefore he could be regarded as modern. "Modern" is of course a slippery word, but in this case one can be more specific. The querelle des anciens et des modernes did not start in France; it started in England, triggered by the debate on rhyme. One of the themes in this debate was precisely the relationship between England and the Continent: between England and France, as well as, on a more symbolic level, between England and Italy. The rejection of quantitative verse based on Greek and Latin models in favor of rhyme led to a declaration of intellectual independence from the continent. "Barbarous" became a positive word, a sign of pride.

And then, Fernand Braudel once wrote, England became an island. Ironically, the historian who associated his name with longue durée was referring to a typical événement, albeit one with a symbolic value: the French conquest of Calais. What one might call the insularization of England was, however, a process not an event: a long process, involving self-reflection that took place on many levels. As I have tried to show, the defense of rhyme played a minor but distinctive role in it.

CHAPTER THREE

A Search for Origins: Rereading Tristram Shandy

The topic here, Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy, seems at first glance unrelated to the previous ones, but only apparently so. First, all my "glimpses of English literature in a world perspective," as the subtitle of this volume reads, share a reference to an island—either fictitious, as with More's Utopia, or real, like England—seen through different textual frames from a noninsular perspective. Second, and more important, each chapter focuses on the relationship between fictional and nonfictional narratives, stressing—against the commonplace that all narratives are ultimately fictional—their intricate, often contentious exchanges. More's imaginary island, I have argued, led him to look at English society and its recent developments from a deeply unconventional perspective. In the second chapter, I showed how at an early stage of the English conquest of the world, some writers defended rhyme as a barbarous device, stressing the insularization of England compared to the European continent. In this chapter I will look at the relationship between fictional and nonfictional texts from a different angle, although again from a noninsular perspective.

The first six volumes of The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy appeared in quick succession during 1760 and 1761 and met with enormous success. At the end of the sixth volume, chapter 40, Sterne cast a retrospective glance at his book in progress. This passage is familiar to every
reader of Sterne's book, and it provides us with an appropriate start-
ing point:

I am now beginning to get fairly into my work; and by the help of
a vegetable diet, with a few of the cold seeds, I make no doubt but
I shall be able to go on with my uncle Toby's story, and my
av

FIGURE 3.1. L. Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy,

These were the four lines I moved in through my first, second,
third, and fourth volumes—In the fifth volume I have been very
good,—the precise line I have described in it being this:

FIGURE 3.2. L. Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy,
By which it appears, that except at the curve, marked A, where I took a trip to Navarre,—and the indented curve B, which is the short airing when I was there with the Lady Baussiere and her page,—I have not taken the least frisk of a digression, till John de la Casse's devils led me the round you see marked D,—for as for 

they are nothing but parentheses, and the common ins and outs incident to the lives of the greatest ministers of state, and when compared with what men have done,—or with my own transgressions of the letters A B D—they vanish into nothing.

In this last volume I have done better still—for from the end of Le Fever's episode, to the beginning of my uncle Toby's campaigns,—I have scarce stepped a yard out of my way.

If I mend at this rate, it is not impossible—by the good leave of his grace of Benevento's devils—but I may arrive hereafter at the excellency of going on even thus; which is a line drawn as straight as I could draw it, by a writing-master's ruler (borrowed for that purpose) turning neither to the right hand or to the left.

This right line,—the pathway for Christians to walk in! say divines—

The emblem of moral rectitude! says Cicero—

The best line! says cabbage planters—is the shortest line, says Archimedes, which can be drawn from one given point to another. —

Before commenting on this passage, I want to clarify the ironical description of the sixth volume, where, the narrator says, "I have scarce stepped a yard out of my way." The volume includes, among other things, a digression generated by a discussion between Mr. and Mrs. Shandy about their child's breeches, which fills the entirety of chapter 19. It starts:

After my father had debated the affair of the breeches with my mother,—he consulted Albertus Rubenius upon it: and Albertus Rubenius used my father ten times worse in the consultation (if possible) than even my father had used my mother. For as Rubenius had wrote a quarto express, De re Vestiaria Veterum,—it was Rubenius's business to have given my father some lights—On the contrary, my father might as well have thought of extracting the seven cardinal virtues out of a long beard,—as of extracting a single word out of Rubenius upon the subject.

Upon every article of ancient dress, Rubenius was very communicative to my father—gave him a full and satisfactory account of The Toga, or loose gown.
The Chlamys.
The Ephod.
The Tunica, or Jacket...

The list goes on for two pages, shifting from breeches to shoes.

Undoubtedly, the reader who read these two passages in 1761 was confronted with a very strange phenomenon, which deliberately transgressed his or her implicit expectations of what a book could be. The artifact still looks very strange indeed. Is Tristram Shandy a novel? And what made Tristram Shandy possible?

In 1917 Viktor Shklovsky, one of the most prominent figures in Russian formalism, answered this question in the most uncompromising way: "Tristram Shandy is the most typical novel in world literature," he wrote in the conclusion to the essay "The Novel as Parody: Sterne's Tristram Shandy," included in his collection Theory of Prose. These words sound much less shocking than they did eighty years ago; today many more people would be ready to identify narrative self-reflexivity as the trademark of the novelistic genre, and Don Quixote as the first modern novel. Shklovsky, who was not particularly interested in the question "what made Tristram Shandy possible?" mentioned the name of Cervantes. Here
he was simply following in the footsteps of Sterne himself, who, in his own unmistakable way, once had evoked his literary ancestors: “By the tombstone of Lucian—if it is in being—if not, why then, by his ashes! by the ashes of my dear Rabelais, and dearer Cervantes....”

Some of the most prominent and disconcerting features in the two passages just presented can be regarded as offspring of, respectively, Rabelais (the mocking use of erudition) and Cervantes (the intrusive presence of the narrative voice). And certainly both Rabelais and Cervantes would have been inconceivable without the rediscovery of Lucian of Samosata made by Erasmus and Thomas More at the very beginning of the sixteenth century. But neither Rabelais nor Cervantes (or, by the way, Lucian) can be invoked as having set precedents for the most blatant feature of *Tristram Shandy*: the absence of a real plot. The motto of the seventh volume (taken from Pliny the Younger, V, 6) can be applied to *Tristram Shandy* as a whole:

Non enim excursus hic eius, sed opus ipsum est

(“This is not a digression from the main work but the work itself.”) Sterne shared Hogarth’s conviction that beauty means variety and its sequen­tia­ne; he might have endorsed the motto ascribed to William Kent, the creator of the English garden, that “nature abhors a straight line.” *Tristram Shandy* is a novel made of unpredictable digressions. So what made it possible?

“Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” Graham Petrie wrote, echoing what has been for a long time a widely shared assumption, “put forward theories of the sequence of ideas which profoundly influenced Sterne and which are the basis of much of the seemingly arbitrary structure of *Tristram Shandy.*” This judgment seems to be based on Sterne’s comment that the association between winding a clock and sexual intercourse described at the beginning of the novel is the sort of “strange combination of ideas” that the sagacious Locke, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all other sources of prejudice whatsoever.” But is this remark sufficient to ascribe the peculiar structure of *Tristram Shandy* to the impact of Locke’s thought, as many scholars have argued against a few dissenting voices?

Another piece of evidence, of a very different kind, seems to give a more explicit echo of Sterne’s self-judgment of his relationship with Locke: it is drawn from the memoirs of Dominique-Joseph Garat, a minor French writer and politician, published in Paris in 1821. Garat reports a conversation that took place in Paris half a century before between Sterne and Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard, Hume’s French translator. Sterne, requested to explain the secret of his originality, mentioned three things: (1) his own imagination and sensibility; (2) daily reading of the Bible; and (3) a “prolonged study of Locke, which he had begun in youth and continued through life. Anyone, he told Suard, who was acquainted with Locke, might discover the philosopher’s directing hand ‘in all his pages, in all his lines, in all his expressions.’” Locke’s philosophy is then defined as “a philosophy too religious to dare to explain the miracle of sensations... a holy philosophy, without which neither a true universal religion, nor a true morality, nor a genuine mastery of mankind over nature would ever be possible.”

It is unclear whether the comment about Locke’s holy philosophy had been made by Sterne, by Suard, or by Garat. In fact, the whole account sounds unreliable, being so indirect; moreover, too many things had occurred both in France and in Europe since the alleged conversation between Sterne and Suard in 1764. In the political atmosphere of the Restoration it was too tempting to present Locke as a pious, restrained philosopher, the very opposite of the bold *philosophes* who had allegedly set the stage for the Revolution. It would be better to leave aside this dubious and peripheral evidence. The voice of Yorick, Sterne’s authorial alter ego, suggests a less deferential attitude: “Wit and judg-
ment in this world never go together; inasmuch as they are two operations differing from each other as wide as east is from west. So, says Locke, so are fasting and hiccuping, say I. According to J. Traugott, the author of the book Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric, Locke's Essay on Human Understanding was the "formal cause of Tristram." But even Traugott ultimately admits that the latter's "digressions (and there is nothing else in the book) must be brought on by some association of ideas—doubtless they are, since to connect ideas is to associate them—but it is not Locke's association of ideas." The same critic spoke of "Sterne's skeptical development of Locke." If Locke's Essay is, as I believe, a false trail, in what direction should we turn to find, if not the "formal cause," at least the literary challenge that made Sterne's project possible?

My answer is this: Tristram Shandy is basically a fictionalized response to a set of options provided by Pierre Bayle's Dictionnaire historique et critique, both in its content and in its peculiar structure. The connections between Sterne and Bayle have been pointed out before. Some time ago, in a pathbreaking but largely ignored article, E. Doherty explored the influence on Sterne of the English translation of Bayle's Dictionary, which he had borrowed in 1752 from the Minster Library and kept on loan for ten months. From what evidence I have been able to assemble, Doherty wrote, "Sterne saw and enjoyed the joke of using scurrilous or obscene snippets from the Dictionary to complicate his own telling of a tale in Tristram Shandy, looked on the vast work as another monument to man's absurdity, and saw the parade of learning as a worthy counterpart to Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy. But, more than this, he went on, 'because Mr. Shandy is just the kind of man whom Tristram would associate with this kind of quaint scholarship and weighty substance, Sterne enjoys using Bayle against 'my father.'"

I would leave aside the last observation, since the narrator's point of view may not coincide with Sterne's. Doherty's conclusions differ from mine largely because they deal only with the novel's content, ignoring its formal structure. I argue that in that structure Sterne's use of Bayle had a purpose beyond merely "complicating [his own] telling of a tale in Tristram Shandy," as Doherty said. I focus on three issues: (a) digressions; (b) obscenities; and (c) the handling of time.

Bayle's fondness for digressions is well known. In his Pensées diverses sur la comédie he proudly confessed: "I do not know what a regular reflection is; I am always ready to change; I often leave aside my subject, I jump into places following unpredictable by-ways, and a doctor who wants regularity and method everywhere would easily lose patience with me." These habits found an appropriate outlet in the enterprise that made Bayle's name famous all over Europe, his Dictionnaire historique et critique. Bayle's original project seemed unambitious: a list of factual mistakes he had found in earlier encyclopedias, such as Moréri's. Years of incessant, lonely work produced four folio volumes, totaling 3,269 pages in the edition I consulted, published in Basel in 1741, most of which were in small print, for reasons I will explain shortly. Each of them was shaped by Bayle's passion for truth, starting from factual truth. Figure 3.3 reproduces a page of Bayle's Dictionary.

The text of each entry is surrounded by a three-tiered system of footnotes: lowercase a, b, c, and so on for footnotes to the main text; uppercase A, B, C, etc., for longer remarks; and footnotes numbered 1, 2, 3, and up on the remarks. Sometimes, for the sake of clarity, additional typographical signs, such as asterisks or crosses, were added as well.

The clever typographical arrangement of Bayle's Dictionary was an improved version of two previous, authoritative, and possibly related models: the annotated Bible, inspired by the Talmud, and the annotated
Digestum, the great collection of Roman laws inspired by the emperor Justinian (figs. 3.4 and 3.5). But these typographical analogies are ultimately deceptive. In the Bible, in the Talmud, and in the Digestum, the relationship between text and comments is centripetal, being focused on the text. In Bayle's Dictionary the relationship between text and footnotes is centrifugal. Des Maizeaux, in his deferential biography of Bayle, admitted that "sometimes the Text seems to have been made for the sake of the Remarks." It was true that Bayle often concealed his boldest skeptical remarks in long footnotes appended to some peripheral articles. But he regarded the search for a truth, albeit peripheral and minuscule, as an aim in itself. For Bayle, truth was, so to speak, indivisible.

The Dictionary's typographical arrangement gives every reader the opportunity to check Bayle as he checks every date, every quotation, every piece of information, and to share Bayle's regressive and digressive path toward the sources of truth (or of error). But Bayle always remains the absolute master of the game: he acts like a despot, impervious to both limits and constraints. A given entry in his Dictionary can go on for more than eighteen folio pages (as does the one on Spinoza) or for a few lines. In the maze of the footnotes all sorts of topics can suddenly crop up: for instance, a discussion of Descartes's cosmology in the entry on "Ovid" or a debate on the possibility of leading a virtuous life without believing in God's providence in the entry on "Sommona-Codom," dedicated to an obscure religious man from Siam.

Sterne's novel shares Bayle's freedom and lack of constraints. And Tristram Shandy's search for his own origins as a human being follows a regressive and digressive pattern that transposes the erratic path of Bayle's erudite research to a fictional level. Sterne's diagrams are in fact a jocular homage to Bayle's Dictionary. The double notation system (A, c) echoes Bayle's three-tiered system (fig. 3.2). Moreover Doherty dug out a hidden allusion to Bayle's Dictionary in Sterne's comment on the diagram: "I have not taken the least frisk of a digression, till John de la
Casse’s devils led me the round you see marked D. John de la Casse is Giovanni della Casa, archbishop of Benevento, the author of Il Galateo, the famous book on etiquette. As Bayle recalled in a scandalized tone (hardly masking his obvious relish), Archbishop della Casa had written a poem in his youth, Capitolo del Forno (The oven), where he admitted to having occasionally indulged in sodomy.

This leads me to my next topic: obscenities. Every reader of Tristram Shandy will be grateful to Doherty for having clarified Sterne’s nearly private joke. But the point I would like to make about obscenities is a larger one, since it is related to the novel’s construction not to the content of a specific passage.

Bayle spiced many entries of his Dictionary with long (and often extremely funny) quotations, usually in Latin, dealing with sexual matters. Rightly or wrongly, Elisabeth Labrousse detected behind them some traces of a puritanical attitude toward sex. Bayle produced a long explanation (more than twenty folio pages in the English translation) bearing the title: “That if there are some obscenities in this book, they are such as cannot be justly censured.” To those who argued that writers should refrain from using indecent words or lewd expressions, Bayle objected by pushing the argument to an extreme. He relied on Molière’s play La Critique de l’Ecole des Femmes, where a group of précieuses engage in a debate on the alleged bawdiness of the author’s previous play, L’Ecole des Femmes: “Those obscenities, God be thanked,” one précieuse says, “appear bare-faced, they have not the least covering; the boldest eyes are frightened at their nakedness. That passage of the scene, wherein Agnes mentions what was got from her, is more than sufficient to prove what I say. Is not modesty visibly offended by what Agnes says in the place we speak of?”

Another précieuse replies: “Not at all. Agnes does not say a word but what is very modest; and if you will have it, that she means something else, the obscenity proceeds from you, and not from her, for she speaks only of a ribbon that one got from her.”

“Ahl you may talk of a ribbon as much as you please; but that my where she stops, was not put there for nothing; it occasions strange thoughts, that my is furiously scandalous; and say what you will you can never justify the insolence of that my. There is an intolerable obscenity in it.”

Bayle commented on this dialogue twice, in quick succession. In a footnote he wrote: “I am to observe that, in this passage of Molière, every body expects to hear Agnes say, that some body has got her maid-enhead, which excites a very obscene idea.” Therefore, Bayle went on in the main text, “that discourse, though never so impertinent, would be proper and honest, according to this principle, All words which defile the imagination, that is to say, which denote an obscene object, ought to be laid aside.”

Having unfolded the absurd implications of this principle, Bayle triumphantly concluded that there was no difference between the most obscene and the most bashful language, since everything depends on the reader’s (or listener’s) reactions. Sterne explored this idea in many ways: from the white page where the reader of Tristram Shandy is asked to draw the alluring features of Widow Wadman (“Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you—tis all one to me—please but your own fancy in it”) to the description of Corporal Trim courting Mrs. Bridget (figs. 36 and 37). In both cases, as well as in many others, a general principle is at work, which is spelled out, in a different mood, in one of Yorick’s sermons: “Give but the outline of a story—let spleen or prudence snatch the pencil, and they will finish it with so many hard strokes, and with so dirty a colouring, that candor and courtesy will fit in torture as they look at it.” The reader is actively involved in the production of the text, effectively counterbalancing the despotic capriciousness of the unconstrained narrator.
And possibly, gentle reader, with such a temptation—so would it be! For never did they eyes behold, or the conscience ever, any thing, so this world more contemptible than widow Walader.

CHAP. XXXVIII.

To conceive this right—call for pen and ink—here's paper ready to your hand. Sit down, Sir, paint her in your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—and unlike your wife; your confidence will let you—let all one to me—please but your own fancy is it.


CHAP. XXIX.

Twix like the momentary contest in the mind's eye—like the April morning. "Whether Bridget should laugh or cry?"

She struck up a rolling-piece—twice ten to one she had laugh'd—

The corporal in/b not y... filled his breast, followed up a sense to a tear at least, better than my uncle Toby, and accordingly he affixed Mrs Bridget in this manner.

I know, Mrs Bridget, said the corporal, giving her a most respectful kiss; that shall be good and marked by nature, and art wishing so generous a girl in thyself, that if I know the slightest thing would not wound my heart, much less the honour of your person, and worthy a soul as my mother, wait thou here to be made a counter of—let thou hath been for me, and definite, dear Bridget, as it often a warrior's task, "to please others more than themselves."

Bridget's eyes turned down at the first lines; the corporal expected—

Tell me—tell me thee, my dear Bridget, continued the corporal, taking hold of her hand—which hung down head by her side—and giving a sudden kick—which hapless hair has affixed this? Bridget fell a silent or two—then opened her eyes;—the corporal seized them with the bottom of her apron—for thee opened her heart and told him all.

CHAP. XXX.

My uncle Toby and the corporal had gone on separately with their operations the greatest part of

The relationship between narrator and reader is at the very center of Sterne's handling of time in *Tristram Shandy*, possibly the most debated feature in the whole novel. The gap between the reader's experience of time and the fictional time staged by the narrator reaches a climax in the following oft-quoted passage:

I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume—and no farther than to my first day's life—tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work with what I have been doing at it—on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back—was every day of my life to be as busy a day as this—And why not?—and the transactions and opinions of it to take up as much description—And for what reason should they be cut short? as at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write—It must follow, an' please your worship, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write—and consequently, the more your worshipes read, the more your worshipes will have to read.

This extraordinary passage—"a reductio ad absurdum of the novel form itself," as Ian Watt labeled it—translated the famous argument about Achilles and the tortoise into the relationship between narrator and reader. The argument, as we learn from Aristotle, had been put forward by Zeno of Elea. Once again, we come across Bayle, whose entry on "Zeno of Elea" is one of the most philosophically dense in the whole Dictionary. Incidentally, I wonder whether the anecdote (rejected by Bayle as apocryphal at the end of the entry "Zeno"), according to which Diogenes...
the Cynic would have refuted the subtle reasonings denying motion by the single gesture of walking, might not have inspired the famous episode of Corporal Trim shouting "Whilst a man is free" and "giving a flourish with his stick like this" (fig. 38). This is immediately followed by the comment "A thousand of my father's most subtle syllogisms could not have said more for celibacy." Both the implications and the difficulties of Zeno's argument are extensively discussed in remark F which, as Bayle noticed, could be regarded as a supplement to another entry in the Dictionary on "Pyrrho." But before quoting a passage from the latter, I would like to make a digression myself.

"In recent scholarship," remarked Ian Watt some years ago, "we can find abundant support for seeing Tristram Shandy as the most inclusive literary expression of a movement whose greatest philosophical representative is David Hume." But to my knowledge nobody ever claimed that Hume's work had a direct impact on Sterne's before the two men met in Paris in 1764. In fact, the similarities in their respective approaches can be explained as parallel responses to a common intellectual stimulus: Bayle's Dictionary.

The encounter between the young Hume and Bayle's work on the "high road to Pyrrhonism," to use the title of a collection of essays by Richard Popkin, is considered today a crucial event in the history of European thought.

At first sight, the meaning of the passage is clear. By pointing at the weakness of Christian theology in answering the arguments of the skeptic tradition, Bayle emphasizes the inability of human reason to penetrate the mysteries of faith. But one could also read the passage from a different perspective: Christian theology, by fueling the Greek and Roman skeptic tradition, made it much more far-reaching and radical. If I am not mistaken, Hume indirectly put forward this argument in the section of his Treatise dealing with moral obligation. "I shall farther observe," Hume writes, "that since every new promise imposes a new obligation of morality on the person who promises, and since this new obligation arises from his will, 'tis one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible operations that can possibly be imagined, and may even be compared to transubstantiation, or holy orders, where a certain form of words, along with a certain intention, changes entirely the nature of an external object, and even of a human creature."

Hume immediately stresses the limits of his rather unexpected comparison. Far from suggesting that moral obligations and Catholic sacraments have a common origin, he stresses the opposite: 'But tho' these mysteries be so far alike, 'tis very remarkable, that they differ widely in other particulars, and that this difference may be regarded as a strong
proof of the difference of their origins. As the obligation of promises is an invention for the interest of society 'tis warp'd into as many different forms as that interest requires, and even runs into direct contradictions, rather than lose sight of its object.

In the case of Catholic sacraments, Hume explains, the lack of a social purpose allows them to operate according to their inner logic: "But as those other monstrous doctrines are merely priestly inventions, and have no public interest in view they are less disturb'd in their progress by new obstacles; and it must be own'd, that, after the first absurdity they follow more directly the current of reason and good sense. Theologians clearly perceiv'd, that the external form of words, being mere sound, require an intention to make them have any efficacy."

Christian theology as a privileged ground for thought experiments: this was exactly Bayle's attitude, as the aforementioned dialogue between the two abbots shows. The philosophically trained abbot had no difficulty in proving that the mysteries of Christian religion—such as the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation or the Trinity—were much more vulnerable to the skeptics' attacks:

It is evident, that things which do not differ from a third, do not differ from each other; it is the basis of all our reasonings, all our syllogisms are grounded upon it: nevertheless we are assured by the revelation of the mystery of the Trinity, that this is a false axiom. . . . It is evident, that there is no difference between individuum, nature, and person; nevertheless, the same mystery has convinced us, that persons may be multiplied and that individuaums and natures will not cease for all that to be one. . . . It is evident, that a human body cannot be in several places at one time, and that its head cannot be penetrated, with all its others points, under an indivisible point; nevertheless the mystery of the Eucharist teaches us, that these two things happen every day, from whence it follows, that neither you nor I can be sure whether we are distinguished from other men, and whether we are not at this very moment in the seraglio of Constantinople, in Canada, and in Japan, and in every town of the world, under several circumstances in each place. 40

Let us go back to Tristram Shandy. In one of his most extraordinary self-reflecting meditations Sterne once again translated Bayle's thought experiment based on the Trinity into fictional terms:

In this last chapter, as far at least as it has helped me through Auxerre, I have been getting forwards in two different journeys together, and with the same dash of the pen—for I have got entirely out of Auxerre in this journey which I am writing now, and I am got half way out of Auxerre in that which I shall write hereafter—There is but a certain degree of perfection in every thing; and by pushing at something beyond that, I have brought myself into such a situation, as no traveller ever stood before me; for I am this moment walking across the market-place of Auxerre with my father and my uncle Toby, in our way back to dinner—and I am this moment also entering Lyons with my post-chaise broke into a thousand pieces—and I am moreover this moment in a handsome pavillion built by Pringello, upon the banks of the Garonne, which Mons. Sligniac has lent me, and where I now sit rhapsodizing all these affairs.

—Let me collect myself, and pursue my journey. 41

One is reminded of Hume's famous definition of the self: "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement." 42 But was not Hume also reacting to Bayle? As I suggested...
before, Bayle's paradoxes based on the definition of person in the
dogma of the Trinity might have played an important role in the devel­
opment of Hume's critique of personal identity. I even wonder whether
Hume's epoch-making conclusion that "all the nice and subtle ques­
tions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and
are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficul­
ties" could not be an echo of Bayle's approach to some crucial Christ­
ian dogmas.43 The debate on the relationship between Christ's human
and divine nature, settled in the council of Ephesus in 431, was simply
a matter of words, Bayle wrote in the entry on 'Nestorius' in his Diction­
ary. Cyril, who condemned Nestorius as a heretic for having rejected
the so-called hypostatic union of the two natures in the person of
Christ, might have spared the church, Bayle goes on, a lot of trouble:
"There needed nothing more than to give reciprocally a just definition
of their terms." 44

An echo of this complaint can be heard in another passage of
Sterne's novel:

What a pudding and racket in COUNCILS about ὀὐσία and
ὑπόστασις, and in the SCHOOLS of the learned about power and
about spirit,—about essences and about quintessences,—about
substances, and about space,—What confusion in greater THE­
ATRES from words of little meaning, and as indeterminate a
sense,—when thou consider this, thou wilt not wonder at my
uncle Toby's perplexities,—thou wilt drop a tear of pity upon his
scarp and his counterscarp;—his glacis and his covered way;—his
ravelin and his half-moon: 'Twas not by ideas,—by heaven!
his life
was put in jeopardy by words.45

But the narrator is well aware that the use of simpler words would
not be enough to clarify the intricate relationship between words and
reality. Even the most innocent questions can become highly problem­
atic, as the splendid exchange between the French commissary and Tris­
tram shows:

My good friend, quoth I—as sure as I am I—and you are you—
—And who are you? said he. —Don't puzzle me, said I.46

The last remark, as has been noticed, has a definite Humean flavor. But
I wonder whether Tristram's puzzlement might not conceal also an all­
usion to another, albeit repressed answer to the commissary's ques­
tion, an answer that would have replicated the previous tautology—"as
sure as I am I"—by saying "I am that I am."

I cannot prove this hypothetical allusion to Exodus 5:14. But I hope to
have proved that Bayle and his theological concerns throw some light
on the paradoxically split personality who says 'I' in Tristram Shandy, as
well as on the peculiar structure of the novel.