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The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe

Edited by Peter de Voogd and John Neubauer
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Such imitations as Schummann's may have fallen foul of high literary taste, but they were clearly greatly appreciated by the broader literary public as the Empfindsamkeit movement got properly under way in the 1770s. Meanwhile more subtle literary responses to Sterne's work emerged during this first wave of his popularity in Germany, too, and these include works by the four writers mentioned in the Oxford Companion, namely Wieland (1774), Thimmel (1791–1805), Hippel (1778–81, 1793–94) and Jean Paul, 'the first full appreciator of Sterne' (Price 1953, 195). Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, 1763–1825) was undoubtedly the most gifted of the early comic writers to fall under Sterne's sway – to such an extent, indeed, that he was soon regarded as 'the German Sterne' and would come to be preferred by some, such as Friedrich Schlegel in his Gespräch über die Poesie (Conversation on Poetry, 1800), who liked their comic talent home-grown.

Outside the main lines of the development of the German novel, Sterne was adopted as 'one of their own' by the rising generation of young dramatists making up the Sturm und Drang – Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg (1737–1823), one of the subscribers to Bode's TS, Friedrich Maximilian Klinger (1752–1831), who praises in his notebook 'such a deep and true grasp of the human heart, which one so often finds in this writer!', and Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz (1751–92), who eulogizes Sterne in his Anmerkungen übers Theater (Notes on the Theatre, 1774) and whose comedy Der neue Menoza (The New Menoza, 1774) shows marked Sternean features. Friedrich Schiller's admiration for Sterne was more muted, yet that does not prevent him quoting 'Yorik' amicably in a 1785 letter to Huber (1956, 184), and indeed in his influential critical essay Über naive und sentimentale Dichtung (On Naive and Sentimental Poetry, 1795–96) he counts Sterne a true 'genius', together with Shakespeare and Fielding (Price 1953, 192). Moving outside of belles lettres strictly defined, though, Sterne's early reception among philosophers and theorists was no

13 On sentimentalism in Germany generally, see Sauder (1974–80); on the role of Sterne as spur, especially the fad for Lorenzo snuff-boxes (whose authenticity is disputed by Day in Chapter 13 of this volume), see especially Thayer (1905, 84–89), Findeisen (1958) and CH, 429–31.
14 On all four of these writers, see the last four chapters in Michelsen (1962, 177–394) – who is, I suspect, the source of the list in the Oxford Companion entry. On Wieland and Sterne, see also Bauer (1898), Behmer (1899) and Harris (1973); on Thimmel and Sterne, see also Kyrialeis (1908), Thayer (1909) and Sauder (1968); on Hippel and Sterne, see also Czerny (1904), Schneider (1915), Beck (1980 and 1987); on Jean Paul and Sterne, see also Czerny (1904), Westphal (1924), Schmitz (1930), Hayes (1939), Brandi-Dohrn (1964), Boehm (1965), Montandon (1987), Montigel (1987), Pott (1990) and Ogut (1999).
15 On Schlegel and Sterne, see Neubauer (1984), Montandon (1985, 293–316), Frock (1992), and Chapter 14 of this volume.
16 'Ein ebenso tiefer als wahrer Griff in das menschliche Herz, deren man bei diesem Schriftsteller so viele findet!' (Klinger 1958, 62; cf. 471).
17 See Lenz (1992, 374) and Girard (1968, 341). On Lenz and Sterne, see also Rudolf (1970, 71f.).
less rapturous than among literary writers. As Bernhard Fabian demonstrates (1971, 201), Sterne’s early reception by the German intelligentsia in general – even by a literary theoretician like Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg (1744–96) – was more as a moralist than as a novelist. Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), Herder, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–99) and Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) were early champions, and even Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) used Sterne as an example in his lectures on philosophical anthropology and pedagogics (Fabian 1971, 204f.).

The excesses of the Empfindsamkeit movement inevitably brought about a backlash which did some damage to Sterne’s reputation (Thayer 1905, 156–82, Loveridge 1982), although the more discerning – such as Goethe (1948, 10: 321f.) – were able to separate Sterne’s work from the follies, literary and other, committed in his name. Nevertheless, by the turn of the nineteenth century the new generation of German Romantic writers was decidedly more ambivalent about Sterne than the generation which preceded it. Price comments: ‘Of all the British novelists the German romantics felt themselves most strongly drawn toward Sterne’ (1953, 303), but by now Jean Paul was increasingly seen as offering a rival fictional model. Cases have been made for the influence of Sterne on Ernst August Friedrich Klingemann (1777–1831, author of the pseudonymous Nachtwachen: von Bonaventura [Night Watches of Bonaventura, 1804]), Clemens Brentano (1778–1842) and Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853); like Friedrich Schlegel, though, Tieck became disaffected with Sterne. In his early novel Peter Leberecht (1795), the title character apostrophizes Sterne thus:

O, philanthropic Sterne! how dear you have always been to me above all writers because you do not try to excite our indignation toward human follies and weaknesses, because you do not wield the scourge of satire, but you laugh at and pity yourself and your fellow men alike. (CH, 440)

By the time of Tieck’s 1828 essay ‘Goethe und seine Zeit’ (Goethe and His Time), though, he is setting Goethe off against Rabelais, Jean Paul and Sterne, arguing that the former’s fictions are to be preferred to those of the latter three for they benefit from being organized around a focal point (Blackall 1983, 167).

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18 In including Hamann in this list I am following Thayer (1905) and Price (1953), rather than Isaiah Berlin, who argues (on flimsy evidence) that Hamann ‘disliked Sterne’ (1993, 101). The publication of John Vivian’s work on their relation will oblige a thorough reappraisal.

19 For Klingemann, see Hunter (1974) and Katrizky (1988); for Brentano, see Kerr (1898, 72–79) and Grob (1980); for Tieck, see Lusky (1932).

As far as Goethe himself is concerned, the story of his relation to Sterne, which spanned his writing career, is, not surprisingly, complex and fascinating, and I have discussed it in detail elsewhere (Large 2000), so will confine myself here to a brief encapsulation. Goethe came into contact with Sterne very early, via Herder: he read both *TS* and *AS* in Strassburg in 1770-1771, soon after they first appeared, and re-read both at least twice, in 1817 and then in the last years of his life (respectively, 1830 and 1828). From his first acquaintance with them he was praising Sterne’s works to his friends, reading from them to gatherings, and alluding to characters and episodes from them in his letters. There are passing references and allusions to Sterne throughout Goethe’s writings thereafter – Pinger (1918) lists a total of 148 – but it is not until towards the end of his life, in the late 1820s, that Goethe begins to acknowledge the extent of his personal indebtedness to Sterne, in the one-page essay of 1826 simply entitled ‘Lorenz Sterne’ (1948, 12: 345f.), then in the aphoristic collection ‘Aus Makariens Archiv’ (From Makarie’s Archive), included in the expanded 1829 edition of his last novel *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years), which contains a series of laudatory reflections on Sterne:

Yorik-Sterne was the most beautiful spirit ever active; anyone who reads him immediately feels free and beautiful; his humour is inimitable, and not all humour frees the soul ... He is a model in nothing and a guide and stimulator in everything.  

This last remark seems to me to characterize Goethe’s response to Sterne as a whole, for he does not fall into the trap of slavish imitation à la Schummel – indeed the ‘influence’ of Sterne on Goethe is so indirect that it has generally been denied by commentators – yet Goethe himself feels the need to ‘return to Sterne’ at the end of his life, to pay homage to a writer people might not otherwise associate with him. Goethe’s argument is a development of the early praise (from Moses Mendelssohn, Lessing and others) for Sterne’s originality (Fabian 1971, 195–97) – he recognizes that a true original is least likely to serve as a model, so that one can only learn from such a figure by going one’s own way.  

A similar argument can be made, I think, for the relation to Sterne of E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776–1822), another writer in what one might call the second wave of Sterne appreciation, at one remove from the first and subtler in their homages. Steven Paul Scher (1976a) carefully sketches in the facts concerning Hoffmann’s first reading of Sterne in the mid-1790s, and the actual references to Sterne in Hoffmann’s works, especially in his correspondence with Hippel (in which, for example, he compares his troublesome uncle Otto Wilhelm [O. W. or ‘O Weh’; ‘Oh dea!’] Dorffer to Sterne’s  

21 ‘Yorik-Sterne war der schönste Geist, der je gewirkt hat; wer ihn liest, fühlt sich sogleich frei und schön; sein Humor ist unachahmlich, und nicht jeder Humor befreit die Seele ... Er ist in nichts ein Muster und in allem ein Andeuter und Erwecker’ (Goethe 1948, 8: 480, 485).

22 On Goethe and Sterne, see also Klingemann (1929), Boyd (1932), Montandon (1985, 232–62) and Pörksen (1980).
Uncle Toby); Scher also instances the mimeticism in Hoffmann's early writing. As Scher is quick to point out, though:

I do not regard Sterne as a precursor of Hoffmann, nor Hoffmann as a romantic reincarnation of Sterne. To locate Hoffmann in the company of the numerous Sterne imitators on the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German literary scene would be as futile as to claim that *Tristram Shandy* or *A Sentimental Journey* are mere 'sources' for *Kater Murr* or, say, *Prinzessin Brambilla.* (1976a, 310)

I agree with Scher here: Hoffmann's Sterneanism is much more subtle, more intangible than that; as with Goethe, I would argue that it is a parallelism at one remove — not so much thematic as methodological, indeed meta-methodological. Both Sterne and Hoffmann attempt to allay the anxiety of influence by addressing it in their work (specifically *TS* and *Kater Murr* [The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr, 1819–21]), teasing the reader, inviting the reader through their self-reflexive narratives to reflect in turn on some of the most fundamental readerly questions: questions of influence and imitation, originality and plagiarism, borrowing and theft.23

Despite the best efforts of Goethe and Hoffmann, by the 1830s the reception of Sterne among literary writers in the German-speaking world was undoubtedly running out of momentum. Karl Leberecht Immermann's *Münchhausen* (1838–39) is still recognizably Sternean in conception — the novel begins with Chapters 11–15, then after a discussion between the author and publisher the 'oversight' is corrected and Chapters 1–10 follow — but the interweaving of contrasting narrative strands owes more to Hoffmann's *Kater Murr*, and the whole — ironically enough, for a writer whose previous novel was entitled *Die Epigonen* (The Epigones, 1836) — smacks of an epigonal age.24 In his slight comedy *Leonce und Lena* (1836), Georg Büchner (1813–37), author of the much better known dramatic fragment *Woyzeck* (1835–37), has the character of Leonce make a passing reference to Walter Shandy winding up the clock (1980, 102), but Maurice Behn sees this as merely evidence of the 'limited fertility of Büchner's comic imagination', commenting: 'To readers unfamiliar with Sterne it is simply unintelligible; to those who have read the novel it can only seem a rather clumsy adaptation of a thought that was much more appropriate and amusing in its original context' (1976, 180f.).25

It is hardly surprising, then, that so many critics have hailed Heinrich Heine as the last of the great German Sterneans. Thayer ends the main part of his discussion with the casual remark, 'Heine's pictures of travel, too, have something of Sterne in them!' (1905, 155), and it is indeed the *Reisebilder* (Pictures of Travel, 1826–31) which have been the focus of later critics' attention in this regard. On the first of them, *Die Harzreise* (The Harz Journey, 1826), for example, Ritchie Robertson comments:

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23 I have developed this argument at greater length in Large (2003). On Hoffmann and Sterne, see also Scher (1976b) and Görgens (1985).
24 On Immermann and Sterne, see Bauer (1896).
25 On Büchner and Sterne, see also Majut (1955, 35f.).
Heine shares Sterne’s wit and irony, and his associative leaps (already tried out in the *Letters from Berlin*); but he deepens Sterne’s sentimental emotionalism into a heartfelt response to nature, to legend, and to the qualities of German working people. (1988, 11; cf. 1993, 12)

There are again a great many references to Sterne scattered across Heine’s writings, and of his other works the critical study on *Die Romantische Schule* (The Romantic School, 1836) is most apposite here, for in it he defends Sterne against those such as Friedrich Schlegel before him who had compared Sterne to Jean Paul and found the former wanting:

Some critics wrongly believe that Jean Paul possessed more genuine feeling than Sterne because the latter, as soon as the subject he is treating reaches tragic heights, suddenly switches to the most humorous, chuckling tone; whereas Jean Paul gradually begins to snivel and quietly permits his tear ducts to drain dry whenever his humour becomes the least serious. Nay, Sterne felt perhaps more deeply than Jean Paul, for he is a greater poet. He is, as I have already mentioned, of equal birth with Shakespeare; Laurence Sterne was also raised on Parnassus by the Muses. (*CH*, 449f.)

Popular, philosophical and academic reception in the nineteenth century

If we move on now to consider what happens to Sterne’s reputation and reception in the German-speaking world after Heine, we find that in the second half of the nineteenth century the literary trail does indeed go rather cold. There are isolated favourable remarks on Sterne to be found in the correspondences and diaries of the dramatists Franz Grillparzer (1911, 297, 322) and Friedrich Hebbel (1966, 48, 88, 94, 232), for example, but not even those in the cases of many of the main prose fiction writers of the mid- to late nineteenth century, such as Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (1825–98), Adalbert Stifter (1805–68) or Theodor Storm (1817–88). Georg Lukács (1964, 340) attributes the turn away from Sterne at this point to (what a later generation of writers would term) a new sobriety in the post-1848 period, marking the turn, in literary-historical terms, to Realism and Poetic Realism. Gottfried Keller (1819–90) disparagingly remarks by 1851 that it was an unfortunate and gloomy period when people had to seek solace in Sterne and Jean Paul: ‘may the gods forbid that it might flourish again after

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36 ‘Mit Unrecht glauben einige Kritiker, Jean Paul habe mehr wahres Gefühl besessen als Sterne, weil dieser, sobald der Gegenstand, den er behandelt, eine tragische Höhe erreicht, plötzlich in den scherzhaftesten, lachendsten Ton überspringt; statt daß Jean Paul, wenn der Spaß nur im mindesten ernsthaft wird, allmählich zu flennen beginnt und ruhig seine Tränendrüsen austräufit läßt. Nein, Sterne fühlte vielleicht noch tiefer als Jean Paul, denn er ist ein größerer Dichter. Er ist, wie ich schon erwähnt, ebensbürtig mit William Shakespeare, und auch ihn, den Lorenz Sterne, haben die Musen erzogen auf dem Parnass’ (Heine 1968, 268). On Heine and Sterne, see also Vacano (1907) and Ransmeier (1907).
Shandean Theories of the Novel: from Friedrich Schegell’s German Romanticism to Shklovskii’s Russian Formalism

John Neubauer and Neil Stewart

Friedrich Schlegel

Diderot’s repeated and important uses of TS in *Jacques le fataliste* (Jacques the Fatalist and his Master) (see Chapter 1) show that this novel of Sterne’s found quick resonance in eighteenth-century narratives, even if it could not match *ASJ* in popularity. The full theoretical appreciation of Sterne’s narrative innovation in TS had to wait, however, until the adoption of Shandean techniques in other novels made it evident that Sterne’s deviation from the novelistic norm signified a major departure in the ‘craft of fiction’. Friedrich von Blanckenburg’s *Versuch über den Roman* (Essay on the Novel) (1774), for instance, gives ample praise to both of Sterne’s novels without recognizing the implications of Sterne’s innovations in TS. Blanckenburg’s study of the novel, the first major approach to the genre in German, emphasizes that adventures and external events in general, which are the subject of epic poetry, play a lesser role in novels, which focus on character and its development. Blanckenburg admires Sterne (rather than Richardson) for his character portrayals, the inward turn of his novels, and his use of humour, but he warns against the excesses of whimsicality in Sterne’s imitators (1774, 527). He did not believe, for instance, that a ‘humorist’ could become the internal narrator in a German novel (1774, 191). To the massive interventions of the narrator in TS he devotes no attention at all, presumably because they interfere with character portrayal, but also, perhaps because he did not know Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste*, which was available only to readers of Melchior Grimm’s *Correspondance litteraire* (Literary Correspondence) until its first formal publication in 1796.

For Friedrich Schlegel, who started to develop his theory of the novel in the years immediately after the publication of Diderot’s novel, it was already evident that TS was not just a unique novel but also a prototype for a new narrative mode. Yet TS plays a somewhat controversial and ambiguous role in the line that Schlegel draws in his ‘Brief über den Roman’ (Letter on the novel) (1800) from Sterne via Diderot to Jean Paul. This may in part have to do with Schlegel’s own curious, not un-Shandian, mode of narration. The ‘Brief über den Roman’ is embedded in the *Gespräche über die Poesie*
(Conversations on Poetry), together with other subsections, on the epochs of literature, mythology, and the different styles in Goethe's early and later works. Each section is preceded and followed by commentaries on the content by characters in the loosely drawn frame. The 'letter' on the novel is no letter at all but Antonio's address to his conversational partners. To complicate matters, Antonio claims to repeat here instructions that he had already given to Amalia (in a letter?), who is now also among his listeners. Finally, Antonio also mixes in and develops further Amalia's own earlier views on Sterne. In short, the text has an unclear and shifting focalization, though Antonio is lecturing so hard that Camilla, one of his female listeners, expresses at the end of his presentation her admiration for Amalia's patience to listen to such heavy-duty didacticism. More generally, Camilla praises the 'goodness and indulgence of women', who are a model of modesty because 'they always remain patient, and, what's more, serious, concerning the seriousness of men, and even have faith in their essential artistry'.

Antonio reminds Amalia that she used to admire Sterne and even sent him some letters in his manner. But he does not make it clear whether Amalia herself was really aware of her enchantment with Sterne or whether this is now for the first time revealed by Antonio himself:

Sterne's humour gave you thus a certain impression. Though it was no ideal beauty, it was nevertheless a form, a witty form that thus captivated your fantasy. And an impression that remains so definite, that we can use and shape for light and serious purposes is not lost. And what can have a more basic value than something that stimulates or feeds the play of our inner education in some way.

You feel it yourself that your pleasure in Sterne's humour was pure ... Ask yourself now whether your pleasure was not akin with what we often felt when contemplating those witty playful paintings we call arabesques.

Thus Antonio finds in Sterne's writing a 'play motive' that he characteristic­ally calls 'arabesque', a term that has acquired considerable significance recently not only in Schlegel studies (see Karl Konrad Polheim) but in approaches to Romanticism and literary studies in general. Arabesques have no semantic content; their meaning lies in the play of form.

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1 'indem sie bei dem Ernst der Männer immer geduldig, und, was noch mehr sagen wolle, ernsthaft blieben, ja sogar einen gewissen Glauben an ihr Kunstwesen hätten' (Schlegel 1958, 2: 339).
2 'Sternes Humor hatte Ihnen [Amalia] also doch einen bestimmten Eindruck gegeben; wenngleich eben keine idealisch schöne, so war es doch eine Form, eine geistreiche Form, die Ihre Fantasie dadurch gewann, und ein Eindruck, der uns so bestimmt bleibt, den wir so zu Scherz und Ernst gebrauchen und gestalten können, ist nicht verloren; und was kann einen gründlicheren Wert haben als dasjenige, was das Spiel unserer innern Bildung auf irgend eine Weise reizt oder nährt.

Sie fühlen es selbst, daß Ihr Ergötzen an Sternes Humor rein war ... Fragen Sie sich nun selbst, ob Ihr Genuss nicht verwandt mit demjenigen war, den wir oft bei Betrachtung der wirzigen Spielgemälde empfanden, die man Arabesken nennt' (Schlegel 1958, 2: 330–31).
Unfortunately, restless Antonio (shades of Tristram?) suddenly breaks off his commentary on Sterne’s craft of fiction just at this point, so that we never learn in what precise ways he regards Sterne’s writing as arabesque. Instead, he questions the term and recommends to Amalia Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste*, describing it, with negative hints at Sterne’s sentimentality:

> I think you will like it and you are going to find here a richness of wit quite free of sentimental admixtures. It is designed with intelligence and carried out with a sure hand. We may call it, without exaggeration, a work of art. Of course, it is no high poetry, just an — arabesque. But for this very reason it is in my eyes ambitious, for I regard the arabesque as a quite concrete and essential form and expression of poetry.³

Sterne does not fare well here. Diderot’s *Jacques* may just barely be called a work of art, although it too is an arabesque, meaning here that it is ‘no high poetry’. And Sterne practises this questionable art form with apparently even less success.

Antonio traces then the uncertain status of the arabesque form to the prosaic spirit of his age: it is a wild plant that barely survives in the desert of his unpoetic age, unable to grow and blossom into high art. Antonio concludes cryptically: ‘I mean that the humour of a Swift or a Sterne is the natural poetry of the higher classes of our age.’⁴ Presumably he means that Sterne’s witty and sharp humour is ‘natural’ for the higher classes who cultivate their wit in social gatherings, but heavy fare for the general public. But Antonio goes on, adding to his conclusion further unflattering commentaries on Sterne:

> I am far from putting them next to those great ones; but you will admit that those who have a sense for these, for Diderot, are already on their way to understand better the divine wit, the imagination, of an Ariosto, a Cervantes, a Shakespeare than those who have not raised themselves up even to this height. We should not expect too much from the people of our age in this respect: whatever grew up under such unhealthy conditions can, naturally, not be anything else but unhealthy. As long as the arabesque is no artwork but a product of nature, I regard this rather as an advantage, and I raise [Jean Paul] Richter above Sterne also because his fantasy is much more sickly, hence much quainter and more fantastic. You have not read him for a long time, and I think he will seem different to you now from then. Then compare him at every point with our German writer. [Jean Paul] really has more wit, at least

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⁴ ‘Der Humor eines Swift, eines Sterne, meine ich, sei die Naturpoesie der höhern Stände unsers Zeitalters’ (Schlegel 1958, 2: 331).
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for those who take him as witty: for he himself could easily be unfair to himself about this. And through this advantage even his sentimentality raises itself in appearance above the sphere of English sensibility.\footnote{\textquoteleft Ich bin weit entfernt, sie neben jene Großen zu stellen; aber Sie werden mir zugeben, daß wer für diese, für den Diderot Sinn hat, schon besser auf dem Wege ist, den göttlichen Witz, die Fantasie eines Ariost, Cervantes, Shakespeare verstehen zu lernen, als ein anderer, der auch noch nicht einmal bis dahin sich erhoben hat. Wir dürfen nun einmal die Forderungen in diesem Stück an die Menschen der jetzigen Zeit nicht zu hoch spannen, und was in so kranklichen Verhältnissen aufgewachsen ist, kann selbst natürlich erweise nicht anders als kranklich sein. Dies halte ich aber, so lange die Arabeske kein Kunstwerk sondern nur ein Naturprodukt ist, eher für einen Vorzug, und stelle Richtern [Jean Paul] also auch darum über Sterne, weil seine Fantasie weit kränklischer, also weit wunderlicher und fantastischer ist. Lesen Sie nur überhaupt den Sterne einmal wieder. Es ist lange her, daß Sie ihn nicht gelejen haben, und ich denke er wird Ihnen etwas anders vorkommen wie damals. Vergleichen Sie dann immer unsren Deutschen mit ihm. Er hat wirklich mehr Witz, wenigstens für den, der ihn witzig nimmt: denn er selbst könnte sich darin leicht Unrecht tun. Und durch diesen Vorzug erhebt sich selbst seine Sentimentalität in der Erscheinung über die Späre der engländischen Empfindsamkeit\textquoteleft (Schlegel 1958, 2: 331-32).}

Does Antonio parody here Sterne’s parody, or is his judgement genuinely unsure? Are we allowed to take his voice here for that of Schlegel – as it is usually done? One thing only seems clear: Antonio believes that the prosaic \textit{Zeitgeist} determines Sterne’s arabesque art form but Sterne is not the best among the arabesque artists. It remains unclear whether the judgement that Jean Paul’s imagination is more sickly – and hence much more strange and fantastic – could not be turned around in Sterne’s favour.

The unstable image of Sterne in the \textit{Brief über den Roman} further darkens in Friedrich Schlegel’s Vienna lectures on European literary history given in 1812. The key passage is, to be sure, a criticism of Richardson’s alleged realism, but Sterne, whom Schlegel introduces here as Richardson’s opposite, does not fare much better:

There is something not fully resolvable, and outright mistaken [in the attempt] to relate poetry so immediately to reality and to represent it in prose [as is the case with Richardson] ... Sterne created first that other art that no longer represents, or merely according to whim, and finally dissolves itself completely in a play of this mood with sentimentality and wit.\footnote{\textquoteleft Es liegt etwas nicht recht vollkommen Auflöschbares, und etwas geradehin Verfehltes in dem Versuch, die Poesie so unmittelbar an die Wirklichkeit anzugleichen [wie bei Richardson], und in Prosa darstellen zu wollen ... Jene andere Art, die nicht mehr darstellt, oder bloß nach Laune, und endlich ganz in ein Spiel dieser Laune, der Empfindung und des Witzes sich auflöst, hat Sterne erst erschaffen\textquoteleft (Schlegel 1958, 6: 331f).}

The Vienna lectures were the last ones that Schlegel gave, indeed, they were his last substantial statement on literature. Putting these last remarks on Sterne next to the ones from Schlegel’s most productive and original years before and after the turn of the century, we get a rather slender and quite
critical body of texts. And yet, Sterne acquires a key role in Hans Eichner’s commentary to Schlegel’s key literary criticism in the critical edition of his works (vol. 2). Thus, in Eichner’s view, *TS*, Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste* and the novels of Jean Paul are illustrations of Schlegel’s famous remark in the Athenäums-Fragment no. 116: the novel is ‘animated through the swings of humour’, and ‘witty constructions’ are found above all in the tradition that *TS* had initiated. Perhaps most important are Hans Eichner’s commentaries on Schlegel’s notion of a permanent *Parabasis*. Schlegel defined parabasis as a speech that was held in the middle of an Attic comedy ‘by the chorus and directed at the people on behalf of the author’. The definition agrees almost exactly with OED’s definition of ‘parabasis’: ‘In ancient Greek comedy, a part sung by the chorus, addressed to the audience in the poet’s name, and unconnected with the action of the drama’. However, OED records the first use of the term in English as 1820, some twenty years after Schlegel’s use of it; interestingly, the chronologically second passage in the OED, from 1866, states parabasis was tried at least once by Beaumont and Fletcher and in our time by Tieck. Now Ludwig Tieck, a close friend of Friedrich Schlegel in the first German Romantic group, may be said to have put Schlegel’s theory into practice, by constantly destroying stage illusion. But Schlegel went further, not just because he saw in parabasis a ‘complete interruption and annihilation of the piece’, but by transferring the method from the stage to the novel: he wrote as early as 1797 that the parabasis must be permanent in a fantastic novel (Eichner Notebooks No. 461). In a later passage he even remarked that ‘irony is a permanent parabasis’.

Although Schlegel himself never refers to Sterne when discussing the concept of parabasis, he probably did think of him in this connection. Eichner goes as far as remarking that *TS* is the only novel in world literature that uses it in a truly ‘permanent’ manner (Schlegel 1958, 2: lxvi). Parabasis, an intervention into the illusion of the fictional world, becomes permanent in Sterne’s *TS*, because Tristram, the narrator, disposes of a whole arsenal of interventions: he comments on his own book, his problems in writing it, he addresses the reader in a manner that is now harsh, now mild, and he repeatedly laughs about himself. Sterne’s parabasis is so permanent that we may indeed say that the parasitical passages of the parabasis so overwhelm the ‘basic’ text that we are allowed to regard it rather as ‘basic’. Schlegel describes such a steady self-parody in the Lyceum Fragment no. 108, though linking it to ‘Socratic irony’ and without reference to Sterne:

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7 ‘durch die Schwingungen des Humors beseelt’ (Schlegel 1958, 2: LX).
8 ‘Vor allem aber findet sich die witzige Konstruktion in den Romanen in der Tradition des *Tristram Shandy*’ (Schlegel 1958, 2: LXV).
9 ‘eine Rede, die in der Mitte des Stückes vom Chor im Namen des Dichters an das Volk gehalten wurde’ (Schlegel 1958, 11: 88).
10 ‘Ja es war eine gänzliche Unterbrechung und Aufhebung des Stückes’ (Schlegel 1958, 11: 88).
11 ‘Ironie ist eine permanente Parekbasis’ (Schlegel 1958, 18: 85).
"It is the freest of all licences, for it is by means of it that one rises above oneself." Still more concretely, this time very likely with *TS* in mind, Schlegel speaks in the Lyceum Fragment no. 42 of a 'transcendental buffoonery':

There are old and modern poems that waft the divine breath of irony throughout and everywhere. A truly transcendental buffoonery lives in them. Inside, the mood that oversees everything and raises itself above everything that is limited, even above its own art, virtue, or genius; outside, by performing in the mimetic manner of a plain good Italian buffo.

Such an Italian buffo (like modern comedians) pretends to tell or perform stories, but his actual story consists of the repeated interruption of what should be narrated. And since this is precisely Tristram's manner of telling his story, it may be suggested that Schlegel's theory of irony and parabasis connects more deeply with Sterne than his direct remarks on him. Is Eichner justified then in claiming that Sterne's notion of the 'foregrounded narrator', as practised in *TS*, unquestionably anticipates Schlegel's concept of irony and poetics of the novel?

Perhaps we should be more cautious. The foundations of Schlegel's poetics of the novel were built around 1800; they find their classical expression in the programmatic Athenäums-Fragment no. 116. Analogies with Sterne's art of the novel are indeed evident here. Schlegel's 'universal poetry' cannot be exhausted by any theory, for its first law is that 'the poet's arbitrariness submits to no superior law'; this poetry mostly hovers between the representation and the representor, free from all real and ideal interests, on the wings of poetic reflection.

Read in isolation, these remarks sound like commentaries on *TS*. But the context in Athenäums-Fragment no. 116 also displays the differences. Schlegel's 'poetic state' remains no free 'hovering', no permanent parabasis, because his universal poetry is 'progressive' (*Progressive Universalpoesie*): it can raise to ever higher powers this reflection, multiply it, as it were, in an endless series of mirrors. While Sterne's mode of narrating leaves everything hovering, Schlegel subordinates hovering and poetic fancy to progress. Formulated in more general terms, both *TS* and Schlegel's theory of the novel react to an epistemological crisis, the Kantian question of how we can

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12 'Sie ist die freieste aller Lizenzen, denn durch sie setzt man sich über sich selbst weg' (Schlegel 1958, 2: 160).
13 'Es gibt alte und moderne Gedichte, die durchgängig im Ganzen und überall den gottlichen Hauch der Ironie atmen. Es lebt in ihnen eine wirklich transzen­
dente Buffonerie. Im Innern, die Stimmung, welche alles überzieht, und sich über alles Bedingte unendlich erhebt, auch über eigne Kunst, Tugend, oder Genialität: im Außern, in der Ausführung die mimische Manier eines gewöhnlichen guten italienischen Buffo' (Schlegel 1958, 2: 152).
14 'Und doch kann auch sie am meisten zwischen dem Dargestellten und dem Darstellenden, frei von allem realen und idealen Interesse auf den Flügeln der poetischen Reflexion in der Mitte schweben ... [doch erkennt sie als ihr erstes Gesetz] daß die Willkür des Dichters kein Gesetz über sich leide' (Schlegel 1958, 2: 182-83).
know for sure. But Sterne perceives the narrative consequences of the epistemological crisis with greater resignation than Friedrich Schlegel, who, as we have just seen, imagines that narrators can ‘lift’ themselves, as it were, by means of poetic reflection and whim. Schlegel thus endows poetic narration with a new, both ethical and epistemological foundation. In the case of Sterne we may speak of a radical ‘Copernican turn’ in narration. Natural science is not only incapable of laying claim to objective truth, it does not even succeed in achieving intersubjective consent. The individual subject is in TS thrown back upon itself. A universal poetry or a comprehensive historical narration no longer succeeds, cannot be narrated, because time and space no longer function as *a priori* forms of intuition (*Anschauung*). Their function is restricted to individual psychology. In Kant, the real clocks and the human biorhythms run synchronously. The incongruity between the different experiences of time produces noise in the channels of communication and thus problems for the narrator. Experiences can no longer be exchanged. The personal clocks of the figures in TS are not synchronized, and this is one among many reasons why the characters talk past each other.

If we seek in German Romantic literature analogies for Sterne’s art of the novel, we must look not in Schlegel’s theory of the novel but rather in the writings of Heinrich von Kleist and some novellas of Ludwig Tieck.

### György Lukács

Sterne’s reaction to the epistemological and narrative crisis in the Romantic epoch has obvious relevance also to that of the early twentieth century. How important for modernist narratives was that permanent parabasis that Schlegel (in Rainer Warning’s and Hans Eichner’s interpretation) attributed to TS? Surely fundamental, though only for one type of modernist novel. Mann, Gide, and others do indeed use narrators that playfully or seriously reflect on their narrative mode, but more typical for modernism are perhaps the ‘vanishing narrators’ that minimize their voices and their diegetic passages. Henry James’s *The Awkward Age* consists overwhelmingly of dialogue; in his *The Ambassadors* or in Kafka’s novels the narrator is congruent with the central character and uses it as a ‘reflector figure’. Free indirect discourse, itself a sign of an epistemological uncertainty, is a modernist technique to reduce the narrator’s role, rather than enhancing it in the manner of TS.

Schlegel believed that the most adequate criticism of fiction is another piece of fiction. This may have been on the mind of György Lukács, then only 24 years old, when he wrote in the summer of 1909 what is, next to Shklovsky’s essay, perhaps the most congenial analysis of TS: ‘Beszélgetés Laurence Sterne-ról’ (Conversation on Laurence Sterne). It is congenial because the conversation in the text playfully converses with Sterne as well as Schlegel, and because the conversational form leaves all categorical assertions hovering. The form that Lukács chooses is unusually double-faced: the dialogue form employs a ‘vanishing’ modernist narrator, but only in the sense that the characters’ statements on Sterne and literature are not evaluated by the higher instance of a diegetic voice. A diegetic voice is very much
present in the text, because the 'stage director' gives long and careful descriptions not only of the room of the conversation and the action that takes place in it, but also of the highly fluctuating moods of the characters. He even describes the impact that statements by the characters make on the others, refraining only from commenting on them himself. In contrast to Lukács's later heavy and rather didactic style, this is a lively one-acter filled with romance and conflict.

The three students in search of Tristram are Vince (Vincenz in German), Máté (Joachim in German), and their unnamed but admired and remarkably beautiful middle-class female friend. She is reading Goethe when Vince enters her room with a few well-worn, leatherbound books from 1808 under his arm: an edition of Sterne. Playing obviously on Schlegel's conversation, Lukács lets Vince initiate the girl into the mysteries of Sterne. Since Vince is both more sympathetic to Sterne and more romantically involved with his pupil than Schlegel's Antonio was with his Amalia, the lecture starts with a passage from *ASJ*. To the chagrin of Vince, and very likely of the girl, Máté's arrival tears apart the romantic web of the Sternean text before sentimentality can take over. The clear-headed Máté knows all too well that his unwanted intrusion has created an awkward situation, but he is unable to extricate himself from it because he too loves the girl. In the ensuing passionate and bitter argument, Sterne's art is the immediate subject and the aesthetic principles the more general subject. At stake are questions of intellectual truth but even more the girl's affections. Lukács's text is a Sternean treat of wit and sentimentality: opinions and ideas are embedded here in a greenhouse of adolescent eroticism. As for the readers, they must follow the ball of argument as it passes between the two young men from one side of the intellectual game of tennis to the other. The girl is unfortunately placed in the role of the arbiter for she clearly favours Vince and makes bad calls whenever she intervenes. The fourth voice of the text belongs to the narrator-reporter, who gives lengthy descriptions of the setting and reads the nuances of mood and feeling in each participant; he also comments on the points made by the players and on the dynamics of the game.

For the sake of clarity, we shall not try to follow the flight of debate but consolidate the arguments into two separate sections. Vince judges literature in the manner of Dilthey by 'experience' (*Erlebnis*). An intense literary transformation of lived life dissolves apparent incompatibilities and constructed systems: Sterne is richness, plenitude, life. If Cervantes's Don Quixote and Sancho Panza represent two incompatible worlds, each of the Shandy brothers incorporates both of them. But human relations, which are ultimately deeper and more important in Sterne than individual characters, are not made easier by this overlap: the Shandy brothers do not really communicate with each other, 'each of them is attentive to his own thoughts, and registers [merely] words from the mouth of the other, not thoughts and feelings' (1977, 359; 1911, 281). Their puns are 'crossroads where those searching for each other meet and pass each other, in pain and unrecognized'. Walter's relation to his wife is similar; only Toby and Corporal Trim meet in their shared madness.
Vince is aware that Máté, by focusing on form, will soon punch holes in his vitalistic rhetoric. Anticipating this, he tries to take the wind out of Máté's sails by excusing Sterne's famous excursions as a method of perspectivism:

A human being moves in front of us and speaks a word or makes a gesture, or we only hear his name, and he disappears in that cloud of images, ideas, and moods that his appearance created around him. He disappears so that all of our thoughts can go around him from every side.  

TS's whimsical shifts and changing stylistic directions are for Vince evidence of Sterne's sovereign control in wasteful playing: Sterne plays with the weightiest concepts of humanity and fate, but his characters remain secure in their place whatever happens, like rocks amidst waves. Although Sterne's characters possess merely figments of the imagination, castles in the air, phantasms and playful moments: but the standards by which we call these unreal strike us in comparison as empty schemes. Following the critic Alfred Kerr, Vince defends Sterne by attributing to him the 'romantic irony' of Schlegel's earlier quoted Athenäums-fragment no. 116: the poet's arbitrariness tolerates no superior law. This limitless subjectivity, this romantic and ironic play could be called Sterne's world-view: 'Every writer and every text gives me only a mirror image of the world, in a mirror that is worthy of reflecting all the rays of the world.'

Máté begins his attack by comparing Sterne to the girl's other reading: one cannot love Goethe and Sterne simultaneously. The former must have regarded the latter a 'dilettante' for representing chaotic, raw emotions, even if he often praised Sterne. Sterne's chaos is not life but anarchy, and anarchy is death that needs to be resisted in the name of life. His characters are not round and rich but one-dimensional, defined by their hobby-horses allegorically, as if by means of a straitjacket. Hence Máté interprets Sterne's humour as a derivative of traditional humourn pathology, which defines characters in terms of their dominant internal humour. Part of the problem is that Tristram, the narrator, has his own dominant humour and cannot therefore follow the discourse of his characters or the shifts in their humour. Though Sterne knew that one cannot speak about Uncle Toby's good-heartedness in the same style as about his crazy obsession, yet he was unable to differentiate his discourse. Máté's severest critique of Sterne is that his humour is a sign of 'impotence', a cover for his weakness:

nothing in the world could cover up all forms of inability more securely than the playful gesture of sovereignty. And I cannot but sense this gesture in Sterne, not

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15 'Ein Mensch tritt hervor, spricht ein Wort, macht eine Geste, oder wir hören bloß seinen Namen und er verschwindet in der Wolke von Bildern, Einfällen, Stimmungen, die um seine Erscheinung herum entstanden ist. Er verschwindet, damit alle unsere Gedanken von jeder Seite her ihn umgehen können' (1977, 363; 1911, 286 f.).

16 'jeder Schriftsteller und jedes Werk gibt mir nur ein Spiegelbild der Welt in einem Spiegel, der würdig war, alle Strahlen der Welt zurückzuwerfen' (1977, 369; 1911, 298).
that of strength. I tell you why. Games have a right to exist only if they merely appear as games – for only then are they born of strength rather than inability.\textsuperscript{17}

The unity of Toby's character is at best in the readers' mind; perhaps it existed in Sterne's vision but he was unable to incorporate that vision in the novel's text. And this lack of formal integration cannot be explained away by speaking of perspectivism:

In life, one can, one even must, constantly change one's perspective of things. Images can command us in a sovereign way from which angle we ought to look at them, but once we assumed that position their power is gone. It is no longer sovereignty but impotence if they demand that we look at this part from here and that one from there. And I perceive such impotence here and elsewhere in the writer.\textsuperscript{18}

Sterne, unable to impose order and form on Toby's many adventures or on widow Wadman, pretended that he never intended to do so. In a quest for truth, subjectivity can only be a means, never the goal. Citing Thackeray's criticism of Sterne, Mate claims that in Sterne's understanding every accidental and uninteresting expression of his being was equally interesting and important. Sterne's works are 'inorganic' fragments because he never made a selection between valuable and worthless things:

He did not compose his writings, because he was lacking the elementary precondition of every conception: choosing and making value judgments. Sterne's writings surge forward in muddy turbulence; they are formless because he could have dragged them out endlessly.\textsuperscript{19}

Nor does Schlegel's concept of arabesque apply to Sterne's writing. According to Mate, all characters and human relations in TS are cumbersome, constructed of heavy material, and devoid of grace; the weighty content relentlessly cancels the stylized lightness and arabesque form of the discourse (1977, 377; 1911, 311). Furthermore, chaos is never wealth. Sterne is weak, because he regards 'everything in life as having the same value' and

\textsuperscript{17} 'es gibt nichts auf der Welt, was jede Unfähigkeit sicherer zudeckte, als die spielerische Geste der Souveränität. Und – ich kann mir nicht helfen – ich fühlte etwas dergleichen aus der Geste Sternes heraus, etwas, was nicht Kraft ist. Jedes Spiel hat nur dann Daseinsberechung – weil es eben nur dann aus der Kraft und nicht aus der Unfähigkeit geboren ist – wenn es nur scheinbar Spiel ist' (1977, 366; 1911, 293).

\textsuperscript{18} 'Im Leben kann man, man soll sogar seinen Gesichtspunkt zu den Dingen fortwährend ändern; das Bild gebietet uns souverän, woher wir es zu betrachten haben; doch wenn wir uns einmal auf diesen Platz gestellt haben, ist es aus mit seiner Macht. Wenn es nötig ist, diesen Teil von hier, jenen von dort zu betrachten, so ist das nicht die Folge einer Souveränität mehr, sondern einer Impotenz. Und eine Impotenz empfinde ich hier, wie auch oft anders bei diesem Dichter' (1977, 367; 1911, 294).

\textsuperscript{19} 'Er komponierte seine Werke nicht, denn die elementarste Vorbedingung jeder Konzeption, das Wählen- und Werten-können ging ihm ab. Sternes in triber Wahllosigkeit hinflutenden Schriften sind formlos, weil er sie bis ins Unendliche hätte fortsetzen können' (1977, 373 f.; 1911, 305).
hence he is incapable of selecting, feeling, and experiencing what is truly great: 'spiritual episodism is all of Sterne's life'.

Through Sterne's episodic narration we see the world as if through a 'dirty window pane', we dimly perceive the contours of the great things, but we only have an inkling of them, we do not accept or reject them (1977, 381; 1911, 318). True wealth is to be found only in the ability to evaluate.

By now, Máté clearly has the upper hand in the argument. The girl attempts at one point to come to Vince's help, but naming Wagner's 'unending melody' as a source of form embarrasses him, because he secretly agrees with Máté's response that there are no endless forms in art. He gallantly tries to save her and himself by claiming that all form is ultimately based on some strong feeling and experience, though he well knows that these do not inspire form. He loses the argument but wins the girl's gratitude.

As the girl falls silent, both men think they have failed: Vince realizes that Máté's argument is more powerful, and Máté, concluding that nobody listens to him, departs. He won the argument but not the girl. Once gone, Vince and the girl try to return to Sterne, but Máté has spoiled their love for him. When Vince finally bends over to kiss her, the girl's 'transfigured' face shows relief that 'the whole lengthy debate was merely a highly unnecessary preparation for what finally happened'.

Lukács spoils the irony of his denouement by once more making fun of the girl he has depicted throughout in a quasi-misogynist manner. He himself admitted in a letter to Leo Popper, with whom he stayed while writing the first version of the essay, that 'there was a problem with the eroticism' in the text (see Hévizi 1990). Biographically, this could perhaps be traced to his unhappy relationship with Irma Seidler, to whose memory Die Seele und die Formen (Soul and Forms) was dedicated soon after her suicide on 18 May, 1911. On the intellectual level, the debate on Sterne reflects a powerful tension in this phase of Lukács's thought between a Nietzschean and aesthetic will to embrace life in all its contradictions (Vince) and a Spartan concern with form that claims to be aesthetic but is quite evidently of a moral order (Máté). Looking at the dialogue from the perspective of Lukács's later intellectual trajectory, Máté became clearly the victor of the two souls that were fighting in Lukács and for Sterne. (In the essay this is not yet the case; hence one should not, as Warning does at one point, associate character statements with Lukács's own opinion.) A moral, even ideological, concern with aesthetic form is evident in Lukács's Marxism as well as in his work on literature and aesthetics (the same problem animates Thomas Mann's Death in Venice, which, written in 1912, uses ideas from Lukács).

More important for this chapter is the question of how well Lukács understood Sterne and in what ways his interest in Sterne had shaped his theory of the novel. Let us note first that the conversation's intellectual issue

21 'das[...] endlich geschehen ist, woru die ganze lange Debatte nur eine höchst überflüssige Vorbereitung war' (1977, 384; 1911, 323).
Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe

is clearly TS; ASJ is relevant only for the romance. Let us note furthermore that much of what the opponents say had been said earlier by critics and lovers of Sterne, but nobody had rehearsed so dramatically and vividly the various pros and cons before. Above all, and beyond the individual arguments, nobody, in my opinion, has been able to end a Sternian battle of wit in such a perfect draw. The debate was irresolvable, in part because Lukács's debaters, like the characters in TS, talk past each other.

It is disappointing, though perfectly understandable in terms of Lukács's own later development towards Máté's world-view, that TS and Sterne never engaged Lukács's serious attention again. In Die Theorie des Romans (The Theory of the Novel) – written during World War I, just a few years after the Sterne essay, but published in book form only in 1920 – humour still plays a central role, but the central figure becomes Cervantes. Sterne is mentioned twice in passing as his follower (1963, 50, 107). One readily hears the voice of Máté when Lukács declares that whereas Dante, Goethe, and Cervantes succeed in leaping from subjectivity into the role of an objective recorder, Sterne's and Jean Paul's splendidly loud voices offer merely subjective mirrorings of a merely subjective and therefore limited, narrow, and arbitrary fragment of the world. This still pre-Marxist criticism strengthened only when Lukács adopted a Marxist aesthetics, for Sterne's moody subjectivity could not satisfy the converted critic's demand for portraying 'typical' characters within the realist mode of a Balzac. But this negativity of the post-1910 Lukács towards Sterne may have played a role in Mikhail Bakhtin's consistent appreciation of him, since Bakhtin developed his theory of the novel in repeated reactions against the Hungarian theorist (see Neubauer 1996 and Tihanov 2000). As Neil Stewart notes in his article on Sterne's reception in Russia, TS could be read within the novelistic notion of the carnivalesque that Bakhtin developed in connection with Rabelais. Unfortunately, the long historical section of Bakhtin's 'Discourse in the Novel' repeatedly asserts, in an almost formulaic way, the importance that the line Sterne / Diderot / Hippel / Jean Paul has for the novel, but it offers no analysis of TS. This may not be an accident, for it is not easy to decide whether TS is, in Bakhtin's terms, a 'monological' or 'dialogical' novel.

Viktor Shklovsky

If one wanted to put a date on the beginnings of the transformation which has overtaken literary theory in this [i.e. the twentieth] century [begins a standard introduction to the subject], one could do worse than settle on 1917, the year in which the young Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky published his pioneering essay 'Art as Device'. (Eagleton 1983, vii)

22 'während Sternes und Jean Paul's herrlich laute Stimmen bloß subjektive Spiegelungen eines bloß subjektiven und darum begrenzten, engen und willkürlichen Weltbruchstücks bieten' (1963, 50).
If one is to agree with this view, a substantial part of the credit for having started off literary theory in a modern sense will have to go to Laurence Sterne as well. For it was *TS* that in 1921 inspired the spokesman of the Formalist school to write one of his most famous articles: ‘*Tristram Shendi*’ *Sterna i teoriya romana* (Sterne’s *TS* and the Theory of the Novel). Indeed, the involvement of Shklovsky with Sterne and his *chef-d’œuvre* seems to go beyond that of a fond critic with his favourite object of study: it is a complex and multi-faceted relationship, resembling a lifelong and sometimes troubled love affair. The fictional writings of Sterne and the critical writings of Shklovsky may be said to form a kind of symbiosis and while there is always a strong element of theoretical reflection implicit in the former, the latter with their stylistic originality and brilliant imagery often read like narrative prose. It is not easy to guess what came first. No one, of course, can say for sure whether Shklovsky deduced his theory of the novel and the concept of ‘defamiliarization’ from a reading of Sterne, or whether Sterne’s book came as a godsend to illustrate the critic’s preconceived theoretical schemes. Meanwhile, some other facts are readily enough available: first, the essay on *TS* represents, arguably, Shklovsky’s most convincing interpretation of any single text, and second, his reading of this novel – the key concepts it brought forth – have since become almost synonymous with Formalist narratology in general, sometimes indeed with Russian Formalism as a whole.

Russian Formalism began in 1915/16, flourished in the 1920s and was suppressed by the Bolshevik regime in 1930 for its lack of political perspective. It gained influence in the West when Structuralism gradually gained acceptance in the 1960s, partly through the work of Roman Jakobson, co-founder and major exponent of Russian Formalism, then a member of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters.

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23 We will restrict ourselves here to the consideration of Shklovsky as a literary critic. As a novelist he is certainly also in no small measure indebted to Sterne (see Chapter 6, p.147).

24 According to Aage Hansen-Löve (1978, 35), in its preoccupation with the tradition of ‘Shandyism’, ‘Formalist narrative theory contains as scientific object its own origin’ (Die formalistische Erzähltheorie enthält als wissenschaftliches Objekt ihre eigene Herkunft).

Among the Formalists, Shklovsky is certainly the critic who devoted most attention to Sterne; the others, especially Eikhenbaum, referred to him often, but invariably did so in order to make some point about a different subject or writer. This is of course due to the fact that he was also the one most interested in prose fiction and narrative theory, but also reflects the Formalists’ custom to divide the canon of world literature up between themselves according to authors: Pushkin and Dostoevski were Tynyanov’s; Gogol fell to Vinogradov, Tolstoi to Eikhenbaum, and Sterne (like almost all of the Westerners) was Shklovsky’s territory.

25 Until then, remarkably little had been known about the movement in the West. It is revealing how Shklovsky’s interpretation of *TS* was first presented to Western readers by Kenneth E. Harper in 1954/55, in an article that briefly paraphrased the essay and offered a few tentative comments, but while doing so made no secret of the fact that it was based on hearsay – Harper himself had never seen a copy of Shklovsky’s text.
Prague Linguistic Circle, and a leading proponent of structural linguistics during his American years. The movement started off in two separate groups, each associated with one of the two major Russian cities and cultural centres: the ‘Moscow Linguistic Circle’ and the St Petersburg-based ‘Opoyaz’ (an acronym for the Russian ‘Obshchestvo dlya Izucheniya Poeticheskogo Yazyka’ – ‘Society for the Study of Poetic Language’). The young men who founded these groups, originally students at the universities of Moscow and St Petersburg, later teachers at the Institute of Art History at Petrograd (Shklovsky, Eikhenbaum, Tynyanov, Jakobson), had grown impatient with the state of literary scholarship in Russia and strove for a solid methodology that would put it on a par with the natural sciences. The Formalists made use of the linguistic techniques of Ferdinand de Saussure and although their assumptions were to some extent based on Symbolist notions concerning the autonomy of the text and the discontinuity between literary and other uses of language, they sought to make their own critical discourse more objective and scientific. Closely allied to the Russian Futurists and opposed to sociological criticism, to normative poetics, and to Idealist philosophizing alike, they stressed the importance of form and technique over content. According to Shklovsky, literature was a collection of stylistic and formal ‘devices’ (‘priemy’) that forced the reader to view the world afresh by depicting things in unaccustomed ways. As a consequence, the role of the literary scholar changed substantially from that of an old-fashioned, aristocratic man of letters to that of a modern engineer: he was no longer called upon to provide historical, philosophical or biographical contexts, but rather to investigate the nature of ‘literariness’, itemizing devices and pointing out the verbal mechanisms by which a given text ‘functioned’:

Normal perception goes smoothly, the way a plane-iron glides across a polished wooden surface ... Customary words form customary sentences, sentences form periods and everything proceeds with irresistible momentum, like a stone rolling downhill. The task of the Formal method, or one of its tasks anyway, lies not in ‘explaining’ a work of art, but in slowing down the perception of it, in establishing the ‘formal set-up’ characteristic of the work.  

The concept of ostramenie, i.e. ‘making strange’ or ‘making difficult’, was Shklovsky’s chief contribution to Formalist theory and has been hailed as ‘not just a literary critical term that was to go down in history, but the

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26 Note the characteristic identification of the critical and the creative act: in Shklovsky’s sentence it is actually the critic who ‘slows down’ perception of the work of art, by pointing out the way it is constructed, not the artist, who constructed the impeding form. We will come back to this later.

37 ‘Kak rubanok po polirovannomu derevu bezhit obychnoe obychnoe vospriyatie ... Privychnye slova splelis’ v privychnye frazy, frazy v periody, i vse katiya neuderzhchno, kak kamen’ s gory. Zadachei formal’noho metoda, vo vseakom sluchae odnoi iz ego zadach, yavlyaetsya ne “ob yasnenie” proizvedeniya, a tormozhenie na nem vnimaniya, vosstanovlenie “ustanovki na formu”, tipichnoi dlya khudozhestvennogo proizvedeniya’ (Shklovsky 1923, 205).
It should be pointed out, however, that his original treatment of the term really comprises two distinct, albeit closely related notions, both discernible in the passage quoted above: for one thing, *ostranenie* is said to impede automatic perception according to linguistic and social conventions and to bring about a correction of the beholder's cognition of the world around him (Bertold Brecht's concept of defamiliarization in the drama, for example, stresses precisely this 'ethical' aspect). Second, in a kind of counter-movement, by impeding perception, *ostranenie* draws attention to the impeding form itself. The latter and the devices that make it up become the actual object of aesthetic perception and, finally, the proper object of art (Striedter 1989, 23–24). Shklovsky did not actually deny the importance of the first, but as a literary critic he was interested exclusively in the second, the aesthetic function of *ostranenie*, which for him constituted no less than the very essence of literature.

Despite the rebellious and irreverent tone of some of his early writings, Shklovsky by no means broke completely with the critical tradition. 'Defamiliarization', for instance, was not a totally unheard of theoretical category in 1917. In general, the Formalists' startling theses were often eloquently pointed or radicalised formulations of concepts less spectacularly original than they seemed at first glance: indeed, Shklovsky's essay 'Art as Device' (1969a, 30) explicitly refers the reader to Aristotle's *Poetics* and his notion of xenikon - i.e. the requirement that poetic language appear 'strange' and 'sublime' (1458a). In a more general vein, *ostranenie* and the 'devices' that make it up may be said to coincide to some extent with the definition of irony of classical rhetoric. Rhetorical irony comprises the various kinds of indirect speech, the direct, 'transitive' meaning of which is not identical with an implied subtext. Differences (especially with regard to motivation) notwithstanding - in both cases, playing with the reader's expectation serves to 'impede normal perception' and thus create an artistic effect.

While his Formalist brethren tended to focus their attention on genres that were quite obviously determined by rigid formal specifications, such as poetry or folktales, Shklovsky must have felt that the real proving ground for any literary theory proclaiming the superiority of form over content naturally had to be the novel, i.e. a genre that has always enjoyed notoriety for being chaotic and formless and that reached its full development, a position of dominance and a theoretical basis only after the rule of normative poetics was effectively over (Striedter 1989, 41). To put it another way: the novel has traditionally been suspected of being all 'content' and no 'form'. Shklovsky, however, thought otherwise. In his opinion, general conceptions of what a novel was about - the *syuzhet*, as he called it - were rooted

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28 "... nicht nur ein neuer literaturwissenschaftlicher Terminus, der Geschichte machen sollte, sondern auch das zentrale ästhetische und philosophische Prinzip der modernen Kunst und ihrer Theorie" (Hansen-Love 1978, 19).

29 We will render the term in Russian, so as not to confuse this specifically Formalist concept with what is normally called the *sujet* of a story, i.e. the plot. It should be said, however, that Shklovsky was not very consistent in this respect and himself sometimes used *syuzhet* in its traditional sense (see below).
in one fundamental misunderstanding: 'The term *syuzhet* is too often confused with the representation of events — i.e. with what I would like to suggest be tentatively called the *fable*. The *fable* is really nothing more than material for the formation of the *syuzhet*.*\(^{30}\) Again, the Russian Formalist seems to have drawn on Aristotle, namely on the seventh chapter of the *Poetics* (1450b), where beauty in a work of art is described not as an ontological quality of its components but as a result of their interrelation, of the way the parts are organized, their size and order. Shklovsky applied this basic assumption to various classical novels in his articles: for him, a character like Don Quixote was neither a type (as Heine or Turgenev took him to be) nor a full-blooded individual, but the downright accidental result of an autotelic structure, a carrier-device serving the real *syuzhet* of Cervantes' novel, namely the technique of stringing together heterogeneous materials. Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson were compositional 'functions' typical of the detective story, the *syuzhet* of which consisted in posing riddles and delaying the right answers as long as possible. And finally, *TS*, arguably the most wayward novel of all and certainly one with a remarkable potential to bewilder the reader, was by no means chaotic but 'as regular as a painting by Picasso' \(^{(1969b, 246)}\), \(^{31}\) because it possessed and carried through a clearly identifiable *syuzhet*. 'Sterne', wrote Shklovsky in his famous essay, was an extreme revolutionary of form. The deliberate exposure of the device is characteristic of him. The artistic form is simply presented as such, devoid of all motivation ... The construction of the novel itself is emphasised throughout. Awareness of the form is achieved by way of its violation and this constitutes the content of the novel.\(^{32}\)

Shklovsky proceeds to prove this assertion by supplying a veritable catalogue of devices used in *TS*, such as interruptions, digressions, chronological eccentricities, dislocations of chapters, and the way Sterne has of reversing the order of cause and effect:

If we were to represent the matter graphically, this is what it would look like: an event would be symbolized by a cone, with the vertex representing its cause. In an ordinary novel such a cone would rest on the fundamental line of the novel on this very vertex. In Sterne, however, it is the base of the cone that touches the main novella, — and immediately we find the air buzzing with allusions.\(^{33}\)

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\(^{30}\) ‘*Ponyatie syuzheta slishkom chasto smeshivayut s opisaniem sobytii — s tem, chto predlagaet uslovno nazvat’ fabuloi. Na samom dele fabula est’ Ish’ material dlya syuzhetnogo oformleniya’ (1969b, 296).

\(^{31}\) ‘Eto zakonomerno, kak kartina Pikasso.’

\(^{32}\) ‘Stern byl kraim revolyutsioner formy. Tipichnym dlya nego yavlyaetsya obnazhenie priema. Khudozhestvennaya forma daetsya vne svyakoi motivirovki, prosto kak takovaya ... Vobshche, u nego pedalirovano samo stroenie romana, u nego osoznanie formy putem narusheniiya ee i sostavliaet soderzhanie romana’ (1969b, 244, 250).

Presenting Sterne as a ‘revolutionary of form’ and focusing on TS, Shklovsky was demonstratively dismissive of the way his author had been received in Russia until then: ‘Nothing has been written on Sterne so far, except a few banalities.’

For much of the nineteenth century, critics as well as readers had devoted most of their attention to ASJ, fervently discussing its moral qualities and shortcomings, while neglecting the Englishman’s other novel as being tasteless and bizarre. It was Shklovsky who rediscovered TS for Russian literature. Given his theoretical premises, it is not surprising that he was not interested in Yorick/Sterne, the man of feeling, nor worried about the authenticity of his sentimentality. He does, however, address the issue, if only to throw his own conception of ‘content’ into sharp relief:

A few remarks on sentimentalism in general may be interesting at this point. Sentimentalism cannot be the content of art, if only because art does not have any separate content. The representation of things from a ‘sentimental point of view’ is a special method of representation, similar to, for example, their representation from the point of view of a horse (Tolstoy; Kholstomer) or a giant (Swift). Art is essentially non-emotional ...

Blood in art is not bloody, it rhymes with ‘good’, it serves as material for either the composition of sounds or the composition of images.

Therefore, art is pitiless, or rather: beyond pity, except for those cases where the feeling of pity is used as material in an arrangement. But even then, when discussing it, it is necessary to regard it from the point of view of the composition, in exactly the same way as, if you want to understand how a machine works, you must see the leather driving-belt as a part of that machine, rather than consider it from the point of view of a vegetarian.

Shklovsky’s interpretation of Sterne’s novel culminated in ‘one of the most famous statements of twentieth-century narrative theory’ (West 2001, 283), namely that TS was ‘the most typical novel in world literature’ because it...
openly displayed the characteristics of the genre, stringing together all sorts of materials and applying devices for their own sake without even seriously pretending to tell a story. TS, we may say, simply did what all novels do, only it did so unashamedly, in broad daylight, which made it the quintessential novel, the most authentic, and thus the most ‘typical’.

This deliberately provocative statement has since met with a great deal of criticism. Even such a confirmed supporter of the Formalist school as Victor Erlich called it ‘a strong assertion’, claiming that it was false and betrayed ‘the modern bias of the Formalist in favour of non-objective art, his tendency to mistake the extreme for the representative’ (Erlich 1981, 166). While such a tendency cannot be denied, Shklovsky’s pointed assertion is by no means as shockingly eccentric or arbitrary, nor indeed as radically original, as his critics have generally made out. Again, he is less far removed from the European critical tradition than his iconoclastic demeanour or, for that matter, the geographic location of his home country would seem to indicate.

The structural exhibitionism ascribed by him to TS and its somewhat sweepingly declared relevance for the novel genre as such, recalls, of course, Friedrich Schlegel’s similarly wide-ranging conception of irony, and the relevance of the German Romantic heritage for Shklovsky is nowhere more apparent than in his articles on Sterne. The striking affinity of Shklovsky’s critical writings to their object may in fact be seen as the realization of a major Romantic ideal, namely correspondence between ironic self-awareness within the work of art on the one hand and the critical act on the other: the Romantic work of art is constituted by irony, an irony that impedes the reader’s perception and destroys his illusion of reality; critical analysis ‘destroys’ its object while recreating it by means of interpretation. Shklovsky, when writing about TS, not only gleefully reproduces graphical elements from this book on the pages of his own text, but also, in a kind of performative, imitative understanding, makes a point of ‘laying bare’ his own ‘devices’; ‘How to conclude my article?’, he asks at the end of one piece on Pushkin and Sterne, ‘If this were a novel, one could end with a marriage. With articles, it is more difficult’.38

In fact, declaring TS ‘the most typical novel in world literature’ neatly captures the paradoxically constructive importance of irony for the novel form, the composition of which, as Georg Lukács had put it just a few years before in his Die Theorie des Romans (The Theory of the Novel), was ‘a paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic, permanently unstable whole’.39 Although neither Shklovsky nor any of the other leading Formalists took explicit notice of Lukács, certain parallels and common themes suggest that Russian Formalism cannot be separated from the general European discourse on the novel. Considered in this context, much of what Shklovsky had to say on TS – leaving aside for the moment his radical disregard of all but formal categories – appears

39 ‘... ein paradoxes Verschmelzen heterogener und disreter Bestandteile zu einer immer wieder gekündigten Organik’ (1963, 83).
Chapter 14


Shklovsky, Viktor (1923) 'Eigeny Oneyon (Pushkin i Stern)', in Ocherki po poezike Pushkina, Berlin: Epokha, pp. 197–220.

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