THE COMIC SUBLIME AND STERNE’S FICTION

BY JONATHAN LAMB

The best writers of the early eighteenth century possessed a body of critical theory concerning epic and tragedy which they carefully elaborated, fiercely defended, and hardly ever put into practice. Pope saved bits of his burnt epic Alcander to insert as samples of bombast in his Peri Bathous, while Johnson was forced to accept the public’s judgment against his Irene. Historical, political and social developments sapped the confidence and removed the subject matter necessary for the production of epic or tragic works and presented instead scenes of complicated insincerity to which the appropriate literary response was, ironically, the calculated improprieties of mock-epic and burlesque. The deliberate mismatching of style and subject mimicked and mocked the two-facedness of society, and only on these rather self-destructive terms were authors allowed access to the high styles and noble forms they had been reared to admire above all others. It is an extra irony that the age which was proving to itself so decisively the impossibility of ever writing truly great literature should have become fascinated by another contribution to the critical theory of literary grandeur, Longinus’ On the Sublime. This treatise impelled Pope to write the finest parts of his Essay on Criticism; typically, it also provided a format he could travesty in the Peri Bathous or Art of Sinking in Poetry. Longinus, like the classical critics, seems to have supplied merely the high standards by which low scribbling could be judged, a clue for descending “to the very bottom of all the Sublime” as Swift called it, and not a model for the true sublime. There is no doubt that the double vision of the satirists, the result of pursuing what was ridiculous in art so as to expose what was vicious in public morality, bred a sort of hopeless idealism, expressed as habitual unions of the highest styles with the lowest subjects, or vice versa, that is detectable in the humblest form of polemic, the threatening letter. But with the possible exception of Horace, Longinus is the critic most congenial to irregular experiments in literature; and certainly as the century advanced he influenced and authorized radical departures in attitudes to epic, as well as to the Bible, metaphor and primitive language, which Northrop Frye has
defined as Pre-Romantic “process-writing.” In this essay I want to trace a line of development from mock-epic theory and practice to the “process-writing” of Laurence Sterne, not with the intention of contradicting Northrop Frye’s conclusions but in an effort to give Sterne’s innovations the Augustan context they deserve and a name—the comic sublime.

First of all I want to consider two related aspects of Augustan irregularity—that of forms and that of manners—in order to determine what elements in them were or might be construed as sublime. To begin with manners: by the early eighteenth century the English were strongly aware of peculiarities in their temper which served to distinguish them from the French and which went by the names of singularity and irregularity and later by the more familiar titles of originality and humorism. Nowhere is the expression of this island individuality better known than in the fields of criticism and medicine. Dryden, Pope and Johnson generously season the rules of neo-classical criticism with the exceptions of the wild beauties of English verse by opening appeals, as Johnson puts it, from criticism to nature. Meanwhile an unsteadiness of temperament, induced or aggravated by the weather, exhibits itself as “the English malady,” whose “atrocious and frightful Symptoms” are sung in poetry and detailed in medical works. Between the poles of nature and madness, various attempts at eccentric or random writing are made, from the obsessive oddity of John Dunton’s semi-autobiographical *Voyage Round the World* to the casual elegance of Shaftesbury’s *Miscellaneous Reflections*. Whether the author is a dunce or a man of learning and parts, this irregular method of opening his mind to the world is undertaken as the most honest because the least artificial: he draws his justification from the necessity and the integrity of the national temperament. Even “Mr. Spectator” has the character of “an odd unaccountable Fellow” which is reflected in the loose form of his periodical journalism and which is his warrant for observing society so acutely. It is this sort of unaccountable oddity that eventually characterizes the hero of the comic novel. Adams, Toby and Lismahago have thrived in spite or independent of common forms to become individuals whose minds are open but sometimes unintelligible books; and so they present a double aspect to the social world they have never joined, being both simple and yet honest, eccentric yet virtuous, foolish and yet somehow wise. From the start the odd writer or odd hero represents an equation between social folly and moral worthiness and between in-

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regularity and integrity so tight that to note the one is to note the other. Toby’s goodness is inseparable from his being a “confused, pudding-headed, muddle-headed fellow,” while Parson Adams’ character of perfect simplicity is illustrated by acts of folly and naivety that Fielding concedes from the outset are “glaring.”

The locus classicus for the discussion of the isolated, non-social and therefore original or humorous nature of moral integrity is Tillotson’s sermon “Of Sincerity towards God and Man” and the commentaries offered on it in The Spectator. This sermon is a favorite of Addison’s and Steele’s because it is quoted at length in three Spectators (Nos. 103, 352 and 557), and each time it provides a basis for the distinction between the odd value of the private individual and the vicious tendency of public manners. For his part Tillotson mourns the departure of “The old English Plainness and Sincerity, that generous Integrity of Nature and Honesty of Disposition, which always argues true Greatness of Mind, and is usually accompanied with undaunted Courage and Resolution.” It has been supplanted by empty terms of art and false offers of service and esteem, the debased currency of “a Trade of Dissimulation.” In Spectator No. 103 the sermon enforces a compliment just made to the club by its reverend member, namely, “that he had not heard one Compliment made in our Society since its Commencement.” Steele takes the opportunity to praise Tillotson for a style free from all “Pomp of Rhetoric” and therefore utterly appropriate to the subject: he discourses as sincerely on sincerity, he declares, as Longinus discourses sublimely on the sublime. In number 352 the sermon offers a text for Will Honeycomb’s complaint against the times, far from original, that youth is learning the vices of age and that everything “candid, simple, and worthy of true Esteem” has been sacrificed to fashion and ambition. Addison quotes the sermon in number 557 to make his point that “there is no Conversation so agreeable as that of the Man of Integrity, who hears without any Intention to betray, and speaks without any Intention to deceive”; and he concludes his paper with the fable of the Ambassador of Bantam whose mission to England is an utter failure because he interprets the forms of politesse in their literal meaning, becoming offended in proportion as he becomes offensive. At its simplest, Tillotson’s sermon supports the conventional distinction between English bluntness and French ceremony, between the sincerity of natural manners and the hypocrisies of fine breeding. Addison thanks God he was born an Englishman, able to inherit a language

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wonderfully adapted to a Man who is sparing of his Words, and an Enemy to Loquacity” (No. 135). The character of Sir Roger de Coverley exhibits the honesty, innocence, oddity and shortness of speech that belongs to an unselfconsciously good man, one who has maintained “an Integrity in his Words and Actions” in spite of all the snares put in the way of simplicity. As we would expect Sir Roger is ignorantly English in the theatre, very good at “Natural Criticism” (No. 335), and his conversation consists of a “blunt way of saying things, as they occur to his Imagination, without regular Introduction, or Care to preserve the Appearance of Chain of Thought” (No. 109). In Addison’s scale of singularity Sir Roger’s comes somewhere in the middle, for his contradiction of social forms is not complete or systematic, but only “as he thinks the World in the wrong.” A combination of country living and a club of thoughtful city friends keeps him well protected from social acerbities like city wits and roving Mohocks, and to this extent he is like Toby, Trunnion, or Bramble whose withdrawals from society are tempered with a limited sociability consisting of family, friends or the traditions of an armed service. At the extremes singularity turns into either madness or heroism, and this is when the contradiction of social forms becomes absolute. At one end is a man like Cato who, refusing to pass his whole life in opposition to his own sentiments, ceases to be sociable: “Singularity in Concerns of this Kind is to be looked upon as heroick Bravery, in which a Man leaves the Species only as he soars above it” (No. 576). At the other end is the unhappy gentleman in the same paper who has a commission of lunacy taken out against him for having followed, in all departments of his life, the dictates of reason at the expense of fashion, form and example. Whether considered heroic or mad, Don Quixote is the literary archetype of this extreme singularity, and his descendents in the eighteenth century novel are those like Parson Adams or Parson Yorick who carry their singular selves into the world’s view and risk society’s retaliations. But at all points on the scale, singularity argues some sort of opposition to society and an integrity which is irregular in terms of the social forms it ignores but which is consistent and coherent in terms of private values. This “more than ordinary Simplicity” represents for Tillotson “true Greatness of Mind.” Tillotson’s own sincerity is, for Steele, sublimely self-consistent. For Addison it is potentially heroic.

The confrontation between the singular individual and society at large, whether it is the mild and peaceable pursuit of integrity or
the more ostentatious process of self-exemption from social forms, sets up a conflict between a private and the public schemes of value that is echoed in satire as well as in fiction. For the Augustan satirists one of the most vexing problems (and their difficulties with epic are an aspect of it) is that in the very act of defending the common forms and values of their society they see innovative irregularity in such vast array that those forms and values dwindle before their eyes into singularity. Starting from what seem to be the opposite assumptions of the humorist, the satirist ends up in precisely the same confrontation; and it is no wonder that the anecdotes of Swift, Pope and Johnson reveal them in the attitudes of humorists, cherishing modes of eccentric behavior as if to emphasize that their qualities of mind are no longer representative of the society they live in. However, satire offers a major resource to its agents who find themselves in this predicament, and that is its own irregular form. In an Horatian mood Pope confesses,

I love to pour out all myself, as plain
As downright Shippen, or as old Montagne.

As an ingenuous private man, indulging the casual habits of self-revelation, Pope can use the pane in his breast as window and as mirror:

In this impartial Glass, my Muse intends
Fair to expose myself, my Foes, my Friends.5

Imitating the humorous singularity of the French essayist is, of course, another way of imitating Horace who uses an ambling and indirect method of exhibiting folly, “sometimes an Epicurean, sometimes a Stoic, sometimes an Eclectic.”6 By placing Montaigne, Shippen or Erasmus as middle terms in this sort of Horatian exercise, Pope can claim all the integrity he wants (“My Head and Heart thus flowing thro’ my Quill”) from the very irregularities which make his satire unobtrusively effective. Simultaneously he defines the characteristics of isolated singularity and he exposes the forces which have driven him to it. And while the “present age” he is publishing mistakes him for verse-man, prose-man, papist, protestant, Whig and Tory, he derives the double benefit of being consistent with himself at the same time as continuing a satirical tradition, quietly reconciling a private and public ideal. Swift makes a similar set of extremes coincide in A Tale of a Tub by impersonating the singularity of the very latest writers. His narrator
points proudly to the central item in the catalogue of modern irregularities, “the great Modern Improvement of Digressions,” and he compares it with improvements in cookery such as “Soups and Ollio’s, Fricasses and Ragouts.” He goes on:

‘Tis true, there is a sort of morose, detracting, ill-bred People, who pretend utterly to disrelish these polite Innovations: And as to the Similitude from Dyet, they allow the Parallel, but are so bold to pronounce the Example it self, a Corruption and Degeneracy of Taste. They tell us, that the Fashion of jumbling fifty Things together in a Dish, was at first introduced in Compliance to a depraved and debauched Appetite, as well as to a crazy Constitution.7

As usual in the Tale, the narrator’s metaphors have a literal satiric meaning and his literal statements make metaphorical sense as satire. The “Similitude from Dyet” is not a similitude at all but the etymological derivation of the name of satire itself, the satura lanx or dish of mixed meats which make up that “olla, or hotchpotch, which is properly a satire.”8 Not only does the narrator write satire unconsciously, here he defines it in what he thinks is a novel metaphor. As he pursues the analogy according to the letter, listing all the physical ills that might induce a taste for such food, he loses his grasp on the two senses of taste, which in any case suggested merely that bad literature caters for bad sensibilities, and insensibly makes room for the real suggestion, which is that satirical mixtures are produced not to flatter debauched appetites and crazy constitutions but to correct them. By a scheme of subversive, witty necessity observable throughout the Tale, what the narrator proposes in the way of idle nonsense resolves itself into specific antagonism to just that sort of nonsense. In this conclusive instance his modern formlessness provides the classically loose form of satire, the illustration of the one being the definition of the other, and Swift’s own Horatian integrity finds an inverted image of itself in the glass of modern literary incompetence. To put it another way, the reader experiences simultaneously the cause and effect of satire, the irregularity of dunces and the irregularity of wit which converts the conversions of a crippled imagination back into a consistency that “a great majority among the Men of Taste” (a fairly small club judging by the tone of the “Apology”) will enjoy. Like Pope, Swift reconciles his own internal consistency—wit and taste—with the need for public correction by deploying a two way mirror that allows us to glimpse the one while we see the reflection of

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public folly that calls for the other. It is a combination of “the very bottom of all the Sublime” with “the noblest and most useful gift of humane Nature.”

The authorized irregularity of satire means that the satirist is free not only to shadow the follies of the age in the wild dancing light of his own wit, but also to parody other forms of literature. Dryden mentions the cento of Ausonius “where the words are Virgil’s, but by applying them to another sense, they are made a relation of a wedding-night.” Butler’s burlesque and Dryden’s mock-epic open the road to many experiments in the art of “using a vast force to lift a feather,” as Pope calls it, a calculated transgression against the rules of mechanics and proportion. This sort of satire still reflects and even reproduces the ridiculous disparities and inflated assumptions in the behavior of knaves and fools, but its constant use of great literary models puts the possibility of serious imitation of them at a greater remove. It is a two-sided disqualification that the satirists invite: on the one hand they prove that the social values which belong to the production of epic no longer exist, and on the other they develop irregular habits which satire can happily sustain but not the more regulated forms of epic and tragedy. These habits narrow their social circle into the tight circumference of a club, defined by enemies and founded upon literary tastes which can only be satisfied in practice by parody. One of the results, already obvious in Pope, is to establish extra affiliations with literary irregulars like Montaigne. Prior finds much to admire in Montaigne too; while Swift, much to Pope’s incomprehension, takes a great delight in Rabelais. Samuel Johnson develops a strong taste for the irregularities of Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, and less notable readers begin to consume macaronic and booby literature. Don Quixote exerts a fascination over the minds of satirists and novelists alike. Here we have defined, almost in its full extent, the literary tradition and resources of Laurence Sterne.

Since Cervantes’ appeal is so wide, and therefore likely to be representative of irregularities in style and in heroes that the eighteenth century finds so much satisfaction in, it is best to begin with him. “The use of pompous expression for low actions or thoughts is the true Sublime of Don Quixote,” says Pope. One of Swift’s ironic impersonations, according to Pope, is of “Cervantes’ serious air.” Pope is speaking for many readers who relished the effects Cervantes is able to produce from the distance he sets be-

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tween himself and the action of the story, those fictional con-
tributors to the narrative whom he makes responsible for its faults,
elisions, lies, bombast and parodic historiography. A mock-epic
propriety, which matches collisions in style with collisions in
dialogue between the knight and the squire and which makes the
parodic encounter of high and low styles reflect and mimic the
encounters between Quixote’s dream and the world, is bound to
invite admiration from an age skilled in concocting this sort of het-
erogeneous mixture. But it isn’t simply a compendium of mock-
epic devices and a mad hero that Don Quixote offers its eighteenth
century readership. Stuart Tave puts the date of critical revaluation
at about the same time as the performance of Fielding’s farce Don
Quixote in England—1738.13 After this it is more common to regard
Quixote as a humorist, not a madman, and to study the narrative
complexity of the story less as a vehicle of satire than as an enquiry
into the theory and practice of writing fiction. Even before this,
however, the analogy between Quixote’s defence of a literary ideal
and the efforts of the Tory satirists to preserve something similar
must have been evident and have developed the sort of covert
sympathy with the knight that exists between him and his chron-
icler Cid Hamet Benengeli. Swift’s outrage at Bentley’s attempt to
lessen the authenticity of classical texts is not unlike that Quixote
feels when Cardenio blackens the name of Queen Madosima; and
the way Swift and Pope seem consciously to interpret their lives in
terms of Horace’s bears comparison with the way Quixote models
his career on that of Amadis. Don Quixote dramatizes the odd or
heroic dependence on books which is to become a major theme of
the British comic novel, already apparent in Addison’s examples of
singularity, one of whom is suspected of madness for reciting
Homer out of his window and the other for quoting Milton in his
bedroom. Quixote represents that particular sort of integrity which
is defined by literary activity, an idealism expressed as a practical
demonstration of the neo-classical theory of imitation so that life
itself becomes the realization of a literary model. The growing ten-
dency to call attention to the nobility of Quixote’s character allows
and enshrines this idealism, and when Sterne’s Tristram entertains
the “highest idea” of the “spiritual and refined sentiments” he
finds in Don Quixote, or when a critic like Beattie can refer to the
“sublimity of Don Quixote’s mind,” it is clear that the knight’s in-
tentions can be held to be of a high and even a sublime order, even
if his adventures are comic disappointments.14 This is not to go as

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far as Romantic critics like Coleridge and Leigh Hunt who abstract the Quixotic humorist from the complex social and literary forces which he reflects and embodies, but it is to acknowledge that "true Greatness of Mind" which Tillotson and The Spectator had praised as the accompanying quality of "more than ordinary Simplicity."

As for the Cervantic style and structure, Pope offers some very intriguing comments in his "Postscript." The context is his consideration of Longinus’ criticism that by the Odyssey Homer’s genius had passed its meridian heat and that the sublimity of the Iliad had been replaced by narrative and dream. So Pope has in mind the epic, the sublime and Longinus as he pauses in his praise of the beautiful variety of the Odyssey to commend "the true Sublime of Don Quixote." It is strange that he uses the phrase "the true Sublime" instead of "mock-sublime" or "mock-epic" since the sublime can scarcely be said to exist where there is not some proper and manifest connection between objects, feelings and words. It is possible that Pope was thinking of a part of Don Quixote very relevant to his defence of the Odyssey as a kind of comic epic. The Canon of Toledo’s description of a comic epic in prose is not only applicable to the narrative variety of Don Quixote but is also remarkably close to Pope’s description of the same thing in the Odyssey: the fable may be as various and the hero as diverse as an author chooses to make them, and if the whole is rendered

in a grateful style, and with ingenious invention, approaching as much as possible to truth, he will doubtless compose so beautiful and various a work, that, when finished, its excellency and perfection must attain the best end of writing, which is at once to delight and instruct, as I have said before: for the loose method practised in those books, gives the author liberty to play the epic, the lyric, and dramatic poet, and to run through all the parts of poetry and rhetoric; for epics may be writ in prose as in verse.\textsuperscript{13}

For his part Cervantes, through his Arabian deputy, exploits every opportunity offered by the chivalric epic and this formal interpretation of its real epic potential to invent a mixed fable, mixed hero and mixed narrative style in order to achieve the maximum variety. In the same terms that Cervantes is offering his novel to the public as a comic epic in prose, Pope is defending the variety of the Odyssey as belonging to comic epic (the same terms, incidentally, that Fielding will use to found his genre of comic epic poem in prose in Joseph Andrews). The phrase "true Sublime" suggests on Pope’s part a half-conceived connection between Cervantes’ arts of variety
and Homer's: “Let it be remember’d, that the same Genius that
soar’d the highest, and from whom the greatest models of the Sub-
limine are derived, was also he who stoop’d the lowest, and gave to
the simple Narrative its utmost perfection” (“Postscript,” p. 389).
He seems to want to say that there is as much sublimity in Homer’s
stooping as in his rising, but it is to Cervantes he pays the compli-
ment of having discovered a new and yet true sublime. Because
Pope is trying to rid the term “sublime” from connotations of ac-
tion, vigour, fire, and sustained flight he invokes Horace’s charac-
teristic preference for the Odyssey, and it is likely he is also think-
ing of other definitions and illustrations of it that Longinus offers.
Unfortunately for him and us those portions of sections XXX and
XXXI of On the Sublime are missing in which Longinus discusses
the positive applications of mock-epic, “dressing up a trifling Sub-
ject in grand and exalted Expressions.”16 All that remains are two
examples from Herodotus to show how vulgar terms can be used in
such a way as to have far from vulgar meanings. He returns briefly
to the subject in his discussion of hyperboles where he notes their
double-edged quality: “they enlarge, and they lessen” (OS, p. 91).
It is as if Pope, unwilling to start a controversy about a new defini-
tion of the sublime, makes Cervantes supply an example of what is
missing from Longinus’ treatise. What he proposes quite specifi-
cally, however, is the question “how far a Poet, in pursuing the
description or image of an action, can attach himself to little cir-
umstances, without vulgarity or trifling?” Like his Preface to the
Iliad this “Postscript” exhibits Pope’s fascination with circumstan-
tiality and how far it is reconcileable with the faculty of invention
and with propriety of expression. Again, Cervantes offers him a fine
example of “the low actions of life... put into a figurative style”; and
again Longinus is being glanced at, who says that an accurate
and judicious choice of “adherent Circumstances... and an in-
genious and skilful Connexion of them into one body, must neces-
sarily produce the Sublime” (OS, p. 27). Pope is wondering at what
point the feather can be cut between the circumstantiality of
“stooping” and that of mock-epic, pondering, no doubt, the para-
doxical way in which the extremes of burlesque and mock-epic on
the one hand and sublimity and propriety on the other seem to
meet.

Cervantes offers his English readers a narrative that explores
some of the range and effects of comic epic, one which Pope re-
gards in some way as the perfection of mock-epic, its “true sub-

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lime”; he also gives them a hero who combines the nobility, or sublimity, of intention with a ridiculous public figure and who therefore represents in its plainest form the mixture of private integrity and public oddity that belongs to the singular or irregular man of sincerity. I want to consider a little more closely the sublime possibilities of this sort of character and to examine how these might be realized when the character becomes an author. Montaigne is the outstanding example of a man whose irregularity of self is expressed in the irregular form of his essays. His rhapsodic style of writing (“without any certain Figure, or any other than accidental Order, Coherence, or Proportion”) has the moral value of being utterly devoid of art and, like Sir Roger’s irregular conversation, opens a window on to an ingenuous heart. Diderot says of Montaigne that “the licence of his style is practically a guarantee to me of the purity of his habits” and it is that sort of honest casualness that Shaftesbury seeks to represent in his “random essays” or which David Hartley aims for in the introduction to his Observations on Man by writing “frequently without any express Design, or even any previous Suspicion of the Consequences that might arise.” We have already seen how in the Spectator the “true Greatness of Mind” that singularity manifests and protects is given high praise—Steele even compares the natural modesty of “a great Spirit” with the propriety of expression that belongs to the “just and sublime” in literature (No. 350). Addison also considers literary irregularity, and talking of Seneca and Montaigne as originators of loose and immethodical writing he affirms that if it is undertaken by men of learning or genius to read it is like being “in a Wood that abounds with a great many noble Objects, rising among one another in the greatest Confusion and Disorder” (No. 476). In the following paper he realizes the metaphor by describing the irregularity and variety of a humorist’s garden where plants “run into as great a Wildness as their Natures will permit.” This is called “Gardening... after the Pindarick Manner.” These images look forward to those in which Pope will praise Homer (“a wild paradise”) and to Johnson’s defence of Shakespeare, so that it is no surprise to find Addison using Longinus and Shakespeare in order to praise the exuberant irregularity of genius that cannot be constrained and which bursts its bounds to produce “what we call the Sublime in Writing” (No. 592). By no stretch of the imagination might Addison be suspected of thinking Montaigne’s Essays sublime. In another paper he laughs at him as “the most eminent Egotist that ever
appeared in the World” (No. 562) and considers him diverting in proportion as he is absurd. But Longinus’ own standards are more flexible, and he praises warmly those orations of Demosthenes where “Order seems always disordered” and where “he makes Excursions into different Subjects, and intermingles several seemingly unnecessary Incidents” (OS, pp. 56, 59). Indeed under the figures of *asyndeton* and *hyperbaton* Longinus includes almost every irregularity, from digression to syntactic breakdown, as aspects of the sublime. As long as they are warranted by pressure of feeling any failure in the order of words, even speechlessness itself, may be powerfully expressive. It is not difficult to see that an author like Sterne, already consciously imitating and incorporating the irregularities of Montaigne’s and Burton’s prose, is aware of the permission he gets from Longinus to make digressions, apostrophes, starts and gaps. Yorick and Eugenius have both read Longinus, and we are expected to read him too. In a chapter where Tristram irritably dispenses with all rules and the cold conceits they beget, he says, “O! but to understand this, which is a puff at the fire of Diana’s temple—you must read Longinus—read away—if you are not a jot the wiser by reading him the first time over—never fear—read him again” (TS, pp. 281-2).

It is worth taking Tristram’s advice to find out to what degree sublimity can be supported without a splendid or lofty object for the feelings to work on. From Addison to Kames there seems to be an agreement that the sublime belongs to what is eminent, bold, and huge (as well as irregular) so that, in Burke’s definition, “the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other.” Yet Longinus is not so prescriptive and insists rather on the largeness of soul than the largeness of object, that capacity for “Boldness and Grandeur in the Thoughts” which mean and ungenerous minds can never arrive at. So although the sublime is often the result of considering something immense, like the Creation, it can also be evident in Alexander’s quip to Parmenio. What Longinus does expect is a concentration of the faculties which will need no assistance from verbal “Pomp and Garnish” (OS, p. 14) and which will convey an apparently unmediated impression of the “Flux and Reflux of Passion.” This representation may be so pure and intense that the cause of the feelings expressed is reproduced in the audience’s imagination. Thus you display “the very Action before the Eyes of your Readers” and mimic the very blows of the assault you are talking about (OS, pp. 63, 56). It is a sort of natural

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propriety that results from and in a naked apprehension of what is experienced, the very opposite of irony. In this sense the mind is indeed filled with its object and the words used to represent this fullness will have an immediacy and propriety because they will be implicated in the very experience they are describing. Montaigne had not heard of Longinus, but with the help of Horace and Plutarch he manages to achieve these sorts of effects (in a domestic way) by associating his mind to his feelings and actions. Free of any allegiance to art Montaigne evolves what he calls “naturalized art” by representing in his irregular essays all the oddities that accident and custom invite him to contemplate. “Grandeur of Soul,” he says, “consists not so much in mounting and proceeding forward, as in knowing how to govern and circumscribe itself. It takes every thing for great, that is enough” (III, 456). He limits his faculties to what he is doing and concentrates them on that; so when he dances, he dances; when he sleeps, he sleeps—he even dreams that he dreams—and whatever action or feeling he finds himself experiencing. “I do not suffer it to dally with my Senses only, I associate my Soul to it too” (III, 459). These circumscriptions and associations close the gap between Montaigne’s observed and observing self almost to nothing, and they are expressed in words that are entirely fit and apt. In one of his best essays Montaigne discovers, for instance, that the naturalized arts of making love and writing about it are practically the same: “the Action and the Description should relish Theft” (“Upon Some Verses of Virgil,” III, 131), hence the sweetest sexual pleasures and the best amorous writing result from obliquity and indirection. The pattern of circumscription is completed with his removal of any difference between what he does and what he writes: “I write of my self and of my Writings, very near as I do of my other Actions; and let my Theme return upon my self” (III, 397). Far from ensnaring himself in baroque tangles of infinite regression, Montaigne’s circumscriptions indicate how closely his soul attends to his experience and how faithfully in his “loose and unknit Articles” he represents that attendance. In two ways, then, the Essays can be considered as having sublime qualities: Montaigne’s capacity for absorption in an experience, no matter how insignificant; and the oblique, digressive and unfinished form in which he renders this absorption. And these qualities both stem from what Montaigne himself chooses to call grandeur of soul.
The mind filled with its object is what Sterne, in his sermon “Search the Scriptures,” considers to be the hallmark of the Biblical sublime. Invoking Longinus (“the best critic the eastern world ever produced”) he distinguishes between classical poetry which relieves its effects on “the sweetness of the numbers, occasioned by a musical placing of words” and the “beautiful propriety” of the Bible which arises more from “the greatness of the things themselves, than . . . the words and expressions.” When Yorick derides the French sublime he uses the same standard: “The grandeur is more in the word; and less in the thing.” It is an important idea that is aired throughout the century and often in a context where the primitive sublime of the Old Testament is being preferred above the classical one. For instance “John Lizard” in Guardian No. 86 compares Homer’s and Virgil’s descriptions of horses with the praise of the war-horse in Job 39, and he says, “I cannot but particularly observe, that whereas the classical poets chiefly endeavour to paint the outward figure, lineaments, and motions; the sacred poet makes all the beauties to flow from an inward principle in the creature he describes.” He believes this imparts such spirit and vivacity to the images and style “as would have given the great wits of antiquity new laws for the sublime, had they been acquainted with these writings.” William Smith, who translated Longinus and who is as partisan as the Guardian correspondent in preferring examples of scriptural sublime, praises its “majestic Simplicity and unaffected Grandeur” which consists “not in Ornament and Dress” but in the unmediated confrontation between even “low and common Objects” and what he calls spirit (OS, pp. 130, 168). This produces a natural propriety in the expression which may seem very close to burlesque but which is in fact the very opposite: “He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smell-eth the battle afar off.” In his Inquiry Burke tries to distinguish between refined language, which lacks force in proportion as it is descriptive and exact, and the power of primitive language which gives very imperfect but strong ideas of objects; and he concludes that there are certain natural arrangements of words which are much more apt at conveying the experiences of objects:

Uncultivated people are but ordinary observers of things, and not critical in distinguishing them; but, for that reason, they admire more, and are more affected with what they see, and therefore express themselves in a warmer manner. If the affection be well

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conveyed, it will work its effect without any clear idea, often without any idea at all of the thing which has originally given rise to it.

(Inquiry, p. 180)

It is a short step from this sort of reasoning to Wordsworth’s ideas about language in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. There Wordsworth poses again Pope’s question about how far an author may attach himself to little circumstances; and he answers it by saying that as long as there is a natural force linking sensibility to object, language which is necessarily “dignified and variegated” will result. Indeed what occasions the central disagreement between him and Coleridge is his belief in the primitive and constitutive nature of language; for in low and rustic life “men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived . . . a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets.”

In his note to The Thorn Wordsworth enforces the distinction between the language of conventional signs (including poetic diction) and this much more philosophical language (he uses the term precisely, I think, as a synonym for what was also known as “universal language”) by turning, as “John Lizard,” Smith, Sterne, and Burke do, to the orientalisms of the Bible for examples of majestic simplicity that might be mistaken by refined critics as embarrassing tautologies and repetitions, as disorder without any braveness. Much more confident than Pope (who feels it necessary to excuse Homer’s attachment to low circumstances of cookery and bedmaking in the Iliad) these critics identify a kind of sublime which can attach itself very freely to low circumstances and render them in an irregular style, provided the mind is full enough of those objects to guarantee a primitive and natural propriety in the representation of them.

It is ironic that Pope, one of the first to establish Longinian tenets in English criticism, should have received from one of his major critics and apologists, Joseph Warton, so little credit for snatching graces beyond the reach of art. But by looking at the critical debate surrounding Pope and ideas of sublimity we can arrive at some standards for measuring the comic sublime in fiction. It is Warton’s view that “Pope’s close and constant reasoning had impaired and crushed the faculty of imagination” and out of delicacy he makes his point by quoting Voltaire on Boileau: “Incapable peut-être du sublime qui élève l’âme, et du sentiment qui l’attendrait . . .

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laborieux, sévère, précis, pur, harmonieux, il devint, enfin, le poète de la raison” (EGWP, I, xi). Yet those lines of the Essay on Criticism which exhibit so well that “liberal and manly censure of bigotry” Warton is supposed to approve of, he selects as an example of a mixed metaphor: “how can a horse ‘snatch a grace’ or ‘gain the heart’?” (EGWP, I, 136-7). Despite this he goes to some lengths to redeem Pope from Addison’s “partial and invidious” comparison between the Essay and Horace’s Art of Poetry, asserting that Pope avoids the irregularity of the Roman by proceeding with “just integrity, and a lucid order” (EGWP, I, 101). Just who is being invidious and partial is not quite clear, and Warton manifests most clearly the double vision of the age, able rationally to identify what belongs to the sublime and yet not able to enjoy it: he likes Pope for not being distracted by the warmth and vigour of imagination and yet feels obliged to devalue him precisely because he is bereft of that “acer spiritus ac vis” which mixes metaphors and moves irregularly. Not surprisingly he draws the same distinction between expressive and descriptive poetry that is drawn by Sterne, Burke, and the others when he imagines how Pope’s epic might have turned out: “he would have given us many elegant descriptions, and many GENERAL characters, well drawn; but would have failed to set before our eyes the REALITY of these objects, and the ACTIONS of these characters” (EGWP, I, 290-1). However, Warton’s double vision provides valuable assistance in analysing the qualities of poetry which he enjoys while thinking they are unsublime but which Pope and others felt had sublime potential.

Wit, and particularly mock-epic wit, is approached by Warton with the theory of imitation in mind to show that what is admirable in it is also what is unheroic. Like Addison and Pope, Warton reckons that all that is left to a modern poet is novelty of expression, “to shine and surprise” by the manner in which he imitates the just models of classical literature, those changeless repositories of the common sense of mankind. Although Johnson quarrels with Pope’s definition of true wit as one which “depresses it below its natural dignity, and reduces it from strength of thought to happiness of language,” his own definition of wit as “at once natural and new” merely proposes the problem as a solution since Nature is already the province of Homer and Virgil and, with nothing naturally new under the sun, all that remains is imitation, as Warton points out (EGWP, II, 54). One of the advantages Warton sees in modern novelty, however, is its fidelity to real life; and he instances Pope’s

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contribution to the imitation of Horace (Satires, II, vi), Swift’s City Shower, Gay’s Trivia, and Hogarth’s prints as pieces “describing the objects as they really exist in life . . . without heightening or enlarging them, and without adding any imaginary circumstances” (EGWP, II, 51-2). His preference for this sort of realism blinds him to the mock-epic and burlesque distortions which allow low and ordinary things to be magnified in this way; and it is such a solid preference that he carries it into a variety of areas, praising Montaigne for giving “so strong a picture of the way of life of a country gentleman in the reign of Henry the Third” and drawing attention to the naturalism of Don Quixote: “MADNESS is a common disorder among the Spaniards at the latter part of life, about the age of which the knight is represented” (EGWP, II, 152; I, 133). He even goes so far as to adduce the lively, dramatic and interesting parts of the Iliad from the “innumerable circumstances” that are included in the narrative. Nevertheless he means to draw a sharp line between the circumstantiality that arises from an heroic inability to generalize and those “DOMESTICA FACTA” which are the proper objects of modern writing and which render the man “skilful in painting modern life . . . THEREFORE, disqualified for representing the ages of heroism, and that simple life, which alone epic poetry can gracefully describe” (EGWP, I, 291). At one blow Warton demolishes the careful speculations of Pope’s “Postscript” aimed at finding the point at which moderns, like ancients, might attach themselves to little circumstances without vulgarity or trifling.

Even if Warton ignores the part played by mock-epic techniques in high-lighting the small circumstances of modern life, when he turns his attention to this kind of wit he defines very neatly the ironic element in it that will always inhibit the unmediated encounter of sensibility and object: “As the poet disappears in this way of writing, and does not deliver the intended censure in his own proper person, the satire becomes more delicate, because more oblique” (EGWP, I, 211). Indeed he is right to emphasize the part played by reason in the theory and practice of eighteenth century poetry and wit, because thanks to Locke much of it is directed at the faculty of discrimination. Ideas are united and occult resemblances discovered on the basis of their real incongruity with the purpose of having the rational or moral difference perceived clearly by the reader. Francis Hutcheson points out that it is the contrast “between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection,
and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity, [which] seems to be the 
very spirit of burlesque, and the greatest part of our raillery and jest 
is founded upon it.” 26 Pope’s editor Warburton, glossing the lines 
on true wit, argues that the image given back to the mind is Fancy’s 
homage to the Judgment and an invitation for the latter’s approval 
of her work. 27 When wit is fully embarked on mock-epic or bur-
lesque associations of ideas, the obliquity and irony of the re-
semblances is often properly understood insofar as the reader 
knows the basis upon which they are rationally distinct. To read the 
fourth book of Gulliver’s Travels, for example, is to re-master one of 
the common propositions of logic: that a man is not a horse. The 
moral function of most mock-epic confusions is to promote the dis-
covery that they ought not to exist in good heads and to prompt the 
separation of ideas which wit, mimicking the fantasies and miscon-
ceptions of fools and dunces, has allied. Burke, who can see the 
strength of minds “not critical in distinguishing” things, shows that 
Locke’s supposed distinction between wit and judgment which 
forms the basis of so many theories of wit in this century, is not a 
distinction at all: “There is no material distinction between the wit 
and the judgment, as they both seem to result from different opera-
tions of the same faculty of comparing” (Inquiry, pp. 58-9). Whether 
wit depends on the resemblance or (as Addison and Hutcheson feel 
is sometimes the case) the contrast or opposition of ideas, it is the 
perception of the difference between them, the final and decisive 
act of the judgment, which determines the ironic value of the 
union. To the extent that mock-epic and burlesque pursue these 
judgmental distinctions they have little to do with the sublime pos-
sibilities of irregularity.

Yet Warburton picks out an example of what looks like mock-epic 
contrast in Pope’s Essay on Man but which behaves in a very dif-
ferent way and to which he gives the name sublime. They are the 
lines about Newton:

Superior beings, when of late they saw
A mortal Man unfold all Nature’s law,
Admir’d such wisdom in an earthly shape,
And shew’d a NEWTON as we shew an Ape.

(II, ll. 31-4)

To pay a compliment to Newton by comparing him with an ape is to 
bring it almost within the verge of ridicule, yet a curious encounter 
between the emotions of pride and humility takes place by means 
of the comparison. In his note Warburton says:

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And here let me take note of a new species of the Sublime, of which our poet may be justly said to be the maker; so new, that we have yet no name for it, though of a nature distinct from every other poetical excellence. The two great perfections of works of genius are Wit and Sublimity. Many writers have been witty, several have been sublime, and some few have possessed both these qualities separately: but none that I know of, besides our Poet, hath had the art to incorporate them; of which he hath given many examples, both in this Essay and his other poems, one of the noblest being the passage in question. This seems to be the last effort of the imagination, to poetical perfection: and in this compounded excellence the Wit receives a dignity from the Sublime, and the Sublime a Splendour from the Wit; which, in their state of separate existence, they both wanted.

Warburton’s linkage of the terms “wit” and “sublime” recalls Hutcheson’s terms “grave wit” and “serious wit,” but they stand for opposite ideas; for Hutcheson believes that “In this serious wit, though we are not solicitous about the grandeur of the images, we must still beware of bringing in ideas of baseness or deformity, unless we are studying to represent an object as base and deformed” (“Reflections,” p. 109). But there is no doubt that Pope has brought in a base and deformed idea without any intention of demeaning Newton and has succeeded, as Warburton points out, in a “compounded excellence” from which it is impossible to abstract the idea of grandeur from the low circumstances in which it is conceived. In fact Pope seems to have answered the query from the “Postscript” by calculating to a nicety an attachment to little circumstances which is neither vulgar nor trifling and discovering how much real beauty there can be in a low image by uniting it with a sublime but otherwise inexpressible conception. All the negative feeling that might have been aroused by picturing Newton as a showground monkey and the angels as pitchmen and mountebanks is converted into a positive and ascending feeling which is nevertheless contained within the hierarchical limits imposed by the image. The difference between this sublime wit and the mock-epic it resembles is that the analogical relation of the lower and higher ideas is not separable into the constituent resembling ideas, partly because one of them is sublimely imprecise and partly because it is only apprehended with the aid of the low image. It is as if it were a vertical arrangement from which neither idea can be abstracted or distinguished without entirely losing the effect of their association, and when the reader has climbed by “ape” to
“angel” the “ape” can no more be removed than the rung of a ladder one is standing on. Nor would Pope want it to be, since this sort of sublimity is founded quite deliberately on the qualities of the “isthmus of our middle state” from whose limitations not even Newton is exempt.

As a scholar of ancient wisdom and letters Warburton is well placed to discover what Pope is doing. Having understood the necessity of Ovid’s delivering on “the most sublime and regular plan, A POPULAR HISTORY OF PROVIDENCE” amidst the superficial irregularities of his Metamorphoses, and having grasped the political truths couched by Virgil under Aeneas’ descent into the shades,28 Warburton can discover in Pope’s lines a modern version of that sort of necessity where the sublime idea demands a primitive vehicle on which to be conveyed. It is as if the wheel has come full circle and out of the ironical contrasts of mock-epic Pope discovers a form responsive to just this kind of necessity, a kind of transcendent burlesque. In a sense all primitive metaphors are a form of burlesque since what is almost beyond conception and expression is fixed in a sensible, material shape that allows it to be thought of and uttered but which is necessarily of a lower order than the mystery it conveys. Thus in Bacon’s interpretation of myth, upon which Warburton is modelling his interpretations, the hairy figure of Pan represents the secrets of the universe just as Newton as ape represents the reach of a human mind in establishing the principles of universal motion.

It is significant that two other examples of the sublime selected by Warburton from the Essay on Man are chains of imagery that look like arguments but which are designed to embarrass rational inquiry. In lines 35-42 of the first epistle Pope has, says Warburton, “joined the beauty of argumentation to the sublimity of thought” (III, 7 n.), but the argument consists of “the harder reason” which poses a series of unanswerable questions. In the same epistle (ll. 157-160) Pope answers questioning man by referring him to God whom he apostrophizes as the contradictions the questioner wishes to be resolved, making “the very dispensation objected to, the periphrasis of his Title” (III, 23 n.). In both cases Pope is using the rhythms of argument and the strategy of tautology by accommodating himself to Longinus’ definition of the apostrophe where the periphrasis turns “what was naturally a Proof into a soaring Strain of the Sublime and the Pathetic” (OS, p. 47). In none of these examples does wit assemble ideas on any principle that the judgment

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can approve. They are overlaid and inseparable and, in the case of Newton, present a mixture of the great and the mean that does not have the effect Hutcheson predicts: “no other effect but to separate what is great from what is not so” (RL, p. 114). According to Pope's version of Longinus, he has managed to snatch a grace beyond the reach of argument and reflection “without passing thro’ the judgment.” It is in celebration of this sublime illogic that Warburton pillories some French critics who had accused the Essay of being a rhapsody: “It is enough just to have quoted these wonderful Men of method, and to leave them to the laughter of the public” (DLMD, III, 167 n.).

Since I have suggested that in the “Postscript” Pope was considering Cervantes as in some way an exponent of what Warburton calls the witty sublime, I want to take a scene from Don Quixote which conforms to its standards, and then compare it with a scene from Joseph Andrews and one from Tristram Shandy. The first takes place during Quixote's troublesome sojourn at the castle of the Duke and Duchess, just after Sancho's departure for Barataria and immediately before Altisidora begins her practical jokes. The knight is worried by many things: his numberless obligations to his hosts, a feeling that his fidelity to Dulcinea is under threat, an unease about the way adventures are occurring, and most of all the loss of Sancho. In this melancholy state he goes off to bed:

>> He therefore shut the door of his chamber after him, and undressed himself by the light of two wax-candles. But oh! the misfortune that befell him, unworthy such a person. As he was straining to pull off his hose, there fell not sighs, or anything that might disgrace his decent cleanliness, but about four and twenty stitches of one of his stockings, which made it look like a lattice-window. The good Knight was extremely afflicted, and would have given then an ounce of silver for a drahm of green silk; green silk, I say, because his stockings were green.

(II, 280-81)

Then Benengeli makes an apostrophe to poverty (“O poverty! poverty! what could induce that great Cordova poet to call thee a Holy Thankless Gift! . . .”) in which he lists all the miserable shifts impoverished honour is driven to in order to disguise its penury. It follows the pattern of many ridiculous incidents in the novel by juxtaposing the two narrative styles Benengeli is so famous for, his careful delivery of “every minute particular distinctly entire” (II, 251) and his talent of “launching into episodes and digressions” (II,
It is a perfect example of using pompous expression for a low action and ought to make us laugh at the contradiction between Quixote’s chivalric pretensions (mimicked in the high style) and his abject circumstances (minutely chronicled in the low style). Yet the scene does not excite this sort of laughter nor did Benengeli think it would: he predicts that it will not make us laugh outright but that it “may chance to make you draw in your lips and show your teeth like a monkey” (II, 278). One of the reasons for this is that the chapter reminds us of the correspondence that often exists between the narrator and the knight, for it begins with Benengeli’s deep regret that he has confined his fancy and parts to the single design of this bare history and it contains an account of why Quixote begins bitterly to regret the constraints his profession is laying him under. In a sense both narrator and knight are lamenting the control now being exercised over the story by the inventions of the Duke and Duchess which keeps them both from a liberty they had previously enjoyed. The laddered stocking and Benengeli’s apostrophe are not so remote from each other as might at first appear: the accident represents an aspect of the knight’s loss of liberty and the apostrophe represents feelings about that loss which may seem to be in excess of the trivial circumstance but which both the knight and the narrator are experiencing. The connexion between the minor humiliation and Benengeli’s commentary on it is made even less burlesque because it is stated that “these melancholy reflections are renewed in Don Quixote’s mind, by the rent in his stocking.” More than that the green silk gathers other parts of the story together, like the green ribbons Quixote adorned his helmet with, the sneers of the gentry who deride him as one of “your old-fashioned country squires that . . . darn their old black stockings themselves with a needleful of green silk” (II, 18), and the nets of green thread that Quixote will get entangled in as soon as he has left this enchanted castle. The colour green, the thread, the stocking all combine to make an image expressive of Quixote’s vulnerable idealism, and the little circumstance is given an unobtrusive figurative function which, far from contradicting or being contradicted by the sublime address to poverty, supports, defines and weights it to the point where it conveys a genuine flavor of the pain being felt. Stocking and apostrophe, like “ape” and “angel” in Pope’s analogy, offer a new notion of Quixote’s heroism; they invite us to consider him as a man whose aspirations are bounded by natural frailties which at once frustrate and ennoble them. In

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showing our teeth like monkeys at this mixture we respond both to the comedy and the nobility and don’t allow one idea (of indignity or nobility) to predominate over the other. The one is crucial to the other.

Parson Adams’ entertainment at the joking squire’s recalls the indignities Quixote is subjected to at the castle; and when he stands up to vindicate his dignity in front of his tormentors we are presented with a similar case of heroism whose limited range provides a foundation for larger ideas of it:

“My Appearance might very well persuade you that your Invitation was an Act of Charity, tho’ in reality we were well provided; yes, Sir, if we had had an hundred Miles to travel, we had sufficient to bear our Expenses in a noble manner.” (At which Words he produced the half Guinea which was found in the Basket.) “I do not shew this out of Ostentation of Riches, but to convince you I speak the Truth.”

Although Adams is speaking in his own voice and is therefore free of the burlesque diction that Fielding gives himself permission to use, he provides his own mock-epic inflations by using words like “noble,” “riches” and “truth.” The coin and the ample gesture with which it is produced do not, as he expects, contradict his appearance as an impoverished naif or warrant the truth of what he says. But they indicate the other values of spontaneity, simplicity and odd integrity which Adams’ hosts equally despise and which he is too unselfconscious to estimate. In this respect the production of the half-guinea and words like nobility and truth have, within the limits of the situation, an applicability and a meaning that is not as grand as Adams thinks they have or which they normally possess but which is well above the measurements being made by the squire and his companions. The coin, like Quixote’s stocking, functions both as a little circumstance and as an image upon which thoughts of relative sublimity can be built. Once again, the lower and higher ideas must be taken together, for any attempt to abstract one at the expense of the other would make too little or too much of Adams’ qualities.

Sterne refers to his version of the mock-epic as his “Cervantick humour ... of describing silly and trifling Events with the circumstantial Pomp of great Ones,” and probably he conceived of it initially as a means of satire, having enjoyed great success with his imitation of Le Lutrin, A Political Romance, and thinking his talents lay that way. The remark is made about the description of
Slop's arrival, and it is at that very point in Tristram's narration we see quite clearly how the device has been transformed into a pair of Hogarthian scales on which the *poco più* and the *poco meno*—the insensible more or less—are subtly balanced in order to celebrate the universal “triumph of slight incidents over the mind” (*TS*, pp. 100, 322). Sterne is different from Cervantes and Fielding to the extent that his use of mock-epic and burlesque inflations is never designed to separate ideas by ironic assessments of their comparative value. He has already learned what they discover, and so when uncle Toby gives up the siege of Dendermond to go and help the dying Le Fever, and his nephew avers that it was to his “eternal honour” that he did so and that the “kind BEING, who is a friend to the friendless” (*TS*, pp. 423-24) shall recompense him for his sacrifice, we would be obtuse not to understand the relative but still real value of the sacrifice and the complex significance of Toby’s bowling-green campaigns. Since circumstances alone determine the value of things in the Shandean circle, and since every object within its circumference has at least two handles by which it may be grasped, slight incidents and little circumstances very often have large reverberations and little effort is needed on Tristram’s part or ours to see constant analogies between the miniature and the grand. Sterne’s study of the Bible revealed how “minute circumstances” can be “truly affecting” and what a great pressure they can exert on our feelings and our minds, so he already assumes that little ideas, and even little volumes, can stand for greater ones. But like Cervantes and Fielding, Sterne is careful to control the process so that no falsely sublime ideas supplant those that are anchored in the little circumstances which provide the conditions as well as the images on which the higher ideas can rest. At no point should the comic sublime be mistaken either for sentimentalism or realism because it absolutely depends upon a continuous traffic between high ideas and low circumstances that modifies them both in terms of one another. And always this traffic originates in or is directed towards a peculiar cast of mind which is making no common or logical sense out of the world it perceives.

It is likely that in *Tristram Shandy* the range of devices attributable to the comic sublime will be extensive because the narrative is fully and continuously sensitive to the sorts of character and situation that produce this vertical arrangement of associated or analogous ideas. There is no space to explore all of the range properly, but I want to emphasize those parts which are most prominent and

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which link Sterne firmly with his Augustan predecessors. First of all it should be plain that his irregular narrative is authorized by Longinus and that all his apparent departures from the rules of formal rhetoric, except for the experiments with typography and idiom, are classified in On the Sublime. Although these irregularities are directed towards comic ends, they are designed to convey the full weight and pressure of Tristram’s experience. His ambition to “so manage it, as to convey but the same impressions to every other brain, which the occurrences themselves excite in my own” (TS, p. 337) is a plan to generate that corresponding excitement in the reader which Longinus reckons as the acid test of the sublime, that swelling of the mind to the point where it seems “as if what was only heard had been the Product of its own Invention” (OS, p. 15). By every means in his power Tristram seeks to banish that impersonality of the narrative voice which Warton says is characteristic of mock-epic, and every invitation extended to the reader to participate in the production of his story is to heighten the sympathy and to dull the judgment. The idea of critical distance is so antipathetic to Tristram (and his author) that the Preface is introduced quite purposely into the body of the text not for any systematic or theoretical statement about the work in hand but simply to “speak for itself.” What it speaks is an associationist defence of associationist wit which illustrates why there is no need to pass through the judgment to gain its end. It is a contradiction by enactment of Locke’s influential counter-definitions of wit and judgment that manages, without any arguments, set dissertations or definitions, to make Burke’s point about the judgmental affinities of wit which compares its ideas instead of associating them. It is hard to think of a piece of prose in English which imitates so well Montaigne’s skill at thinking in metaphor and analogy, that tautological shifting from illustration to illustration that Tristram calls dialectick induction and for which he claims Rabelais’ authority too.

I have tried to show in this essay how, with similar social and cultural forces producing the humorist and the mock-epic, ideas of irregularity and sublimity can be attached to both. It is in Sterne’s novel that a narrative style which emerges directly from Cervantes’ “true Sublime” fits most closely and necessarily round the humorists of the Shandy family so that the hobbyhorse itself, that idol of the cave and image of integrity, becomes the vital tool of narrative representation, better than fame, voice, brush, evacuation or camera obscura (TS, p. 77). By taking this step Sterne confronts
some of the apparently intractable problems which the singular man presents admirers and narrators with. The prime one is that he is likely to be socially invisible or socially unacceptable in proportion to his sincerity; for if irregularity stands in some sort of ratio to integrity then, like Sir Roger de Coverley, he will be hard to understand and yet be insufficiently prepossessing to incline an audience to patience. As a breed he is rare, either because (as Fielding suggests) once discovered the lucky naturalist keeps his habitat a secret or because (the more common explanation) he is especially vulnerable to predators. So the first job is to find the specimen, and the second is to make him speak. Tristram therefore establishes a circle four miles in diameter as his world and locates three humorists within its boundaries who can thrive immune from metropolitan knavery. Yet there remains the problem of language and representation. Addison suggests that God alone can understand the language of a thoroughly good and private man:

There are many Vertues, which in their own Nature are incapable of any outward Representation: Many silent Perfections in the Soul of a good Man, which are great Ornaments to Humane Nature, but not able to discover themselves to the Knowledge of others; they are transacted in private, without Noise or Show, and are only visible to the great Searcher of Hearts. What Actions can express the entire Purity of Thought which refines and sanctifies a virtuous Man? That secret Rest and Contentedness of Mind ... These and the like Vertues are the hidden Beauties of a Soul, the secret Graces which cannot be discovered by a mortal Eye, but make the Soul lovely and precious in his Sight, from whom no Secrets are concealed.

(No. 257)

If Addison says there is no language fit for these perfections, Tillotson in his sermon on sincerity defines the predicament of such a man as linguistic isolation. He will need “a Dictionary to help him to understand his own Language” (I, 7) because current words have turned into the paper money of compliment, “running into a Lie” to participate in conversation which “is little else but driving a Trade of Dissimulation.” Expressed in Tillotson’s exchange metaphor, the good and sincere man can neither buy or sell, and his perfections are indeed silent ones. It is a theme Sterne returns to frequently in his sermons. His favorite heroes in the Bible are Joseph, who makes himself known to his brothers in an eloquent silence (II, 232), and Job, whose heroic cast is revealed both in his own verbal restraint and in his patience in the face of the mis-

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constructions his friends place on the few words he utters. Addison’s opinion that words and actions, however innocently uttered and performed, are deceitful mediums and “apt to discolour and pervert the Object” (Spectator, No. 257) is illustrated in the story of Yorick’s life and death. His career is a painful example of how the actions and words of a good man can be either misunderstood or wilfully misinterpreted when they pass through the medium of opinion and prejudice which “so twists and refracts them from their true directions—that, with all the titles to praise which a rectitude of heart can give, the doers of them are nevertheless forced to live and die without it” (TS, p. 23). Nevertheless Sterne has devoted his novel to the business of describing the characters of men who have these silent or inaccessible virtues, and he chooses to sensitize us to the language of inarticulateness and dumbness in which this sort of character speaks. It is a double lesson in morality and linguistics.

In Tristram Shandy there is an alphabet of hobbyhorsical signs that matches the variety of primitive linguistic devices which Warburton classifies and discusses in The Divine Legation of Moses. These are the same devices which critics like Warton, Kames and Burke associate with the sublime, and which Sterne associates with the consistency of hobbyhorsical virtue. First of all there is silence, the primitive muteness of what Longinus calls “a naked Thought without Words” (OS, p. 18). It is this sort of silence which in Tristram Shandy can be certain proof of pity or can weave dreams of midnight secrecy into the brain. Silence is usually made intelligible by some sort of gesture, what Warburton calls “the voice of the sign,” and so the silent disposition of limbs, or the handling of a pipe, or the glance of an eye will often carry the meaning of a hobbyhorsical dialogue. A refinement of the language of gesture is what Warburton calls the speaking hieroglyph, and that takes place when action forms itself into a statement and not just a response. Bridget communicates with Trim by this method. But a subtler form of argument by action is to perform what one is questioned about. Toby proves his hobbyhorse is a hobbyhorse by “getting on his back and riding him about” and Yorick’s journeys through his parish are an explanation in the action of why he rides the sort of horse he does. When Toby whistles Lillabulero or when Yorick reads the account of Gymnast’s fight with Tripet, they are offering examples of this sort of parabolic delivery of a message by gesture. Sometimes these expressive arrangements of the body are accom-
panied by words, as in Toby’s setting the fly free or in Trim’s gesture of dropping the hat while reciting a self-evident truth. In the domain of pure language, the primitive belief in the performative function of words is held by Walter Shandy who constantly exhibits his faith in the power of naming and for whom the most expressive sign of the fall of empires is the fact that their names “are falling themselves by piece-meals into decay” (TS, p. 354). Walter’s theory of the auxiliary verbs, which he steals from Obadiah Walker’s Of Education, is in fact a primitive syntactic basis for a universal language scheme in which, if the word is already known, the thing is known too. In Toby’s case we hear another primitive use of the word, which is the extension of its reference by catachresis. For Toby the origin of language is in military science, and that provides him with a fund of literal terms which, when applied to other phenomena such as trains of ideas, a mortar and pestle, the bridge of a nose etc., imitate the process of early language growth by figurative applications of literal words. As for Yorick’s puns, they are figurative uses of words that remind us how ideas are formed out of the body’s sensations and activities by establishing instant etymologies.

The primitive nature of hobbyhorsical language offers a variety of ways of determining in some detail the characters of the men who use it. Like all primitive language, it both conceals and reveals meaning, and it will offer up its secrets only to those with enough patience and candor to decipher it. Once that effort is made, the hobbyhorse speaks the consistency of its rider and the audience can become as familiar with that consistency as if a Momus glass were placed in the breast. In a comic way certain valuable truths are revealed that were thought to be inexpressible and we learn a tongue that may not be the language of the gods but which God understands. Sterne finds a compendious store of these comic sublimities in Rabelais, and that he regarded them as versions of the sublime is likely from the name he gives to one of his earliest characters. “Longinus Rabelaicus” is the leading figure in Sterne’s Fragment in the Manner of Rabelais where he is busy producing a Kerukopædia, or institute of sermon-making, that will pay as much attention to the tune of the sermon as its content. It will take into account the constitution of the preacher, the disposition of his limbs, the intonation of his voice and all the physical and spiritual accompaniments that belong to saying something with that natural propriety that sincerity demands. Rabelais himself adapts much of

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his wit from the Bible, and he sees “voices of the sign” and punning as fit vehicles for the carnivalesque union of body and mind which he loves because it is the opposite of hypocrisy and insincerity. Sterne has no tradition of carnival, but he makes moral assumptions about the totality of the human constitution (“the soul and body are joint-sharers in every thing they get”—TS, p. 616) of which the hobbyhorse is the odd emblem. Along with the Latitudinarian divines he was so fond of borrowing from, like Tillotson, Clarke, Stillingfleet and Tenison, he sees in Newtonian science a variety of physical proofs of this assumption, and in the work of Cheyne and Hartley he finds physiological accounts of the close relationship between the soul, or mind, and the body. This is the central unifying concept of “sensibility” and the common property of the age, but Sterne typically insists that there is a language appropriate to this union. So the comic sublime is not only the natural language of sincerity, or the constant exchanges between gestural, literal and metaphorical sense that Rabelais passes on; it is also the language of science itself which is supplying the lower, material component of meaning to words like spirit, inspiration and gravity and unconsciously creating the sort of pun Sterne and Rabelais enjoy so much.32

In his narrative Tristram reproduces all the primitivism of his characters’ language, even adding primitive cries, parable, metaphor and the literary equivalent of gesture in the form of hieroglyphs. Since I have defined the comic sublime as mounting a higher idea upon a little circumstance or image in order to give a unified expression of a higher truth that has lower relations, I want briefly to strengthen the links between Tristram’s narrative and certain effects of Pope and Montaigne by way of insisting on the great difference between Sterne’s wordplay and Swift’s. If the comic sublime is a response appropriate to the mixed condition of man, where little circumstances provide the impressions that make his elevated ideas, where mind and body are mutually dependent in making sense of things, and where there is a moral as well as physical relation between what is done and what is thought, it follows that it will affirm the inseparability of the ideas it joins, be they in a pun, a gesture, or a metaphor, because they are already linked in the joint activity of the body and mind. It will also follow that in any account of these reciprocal activities, words will tend to reproduce that reciprocity, not merely describe it or, as in mock-epic, establish an ironic distance between the account and the ac-
tivity, and between the upper and lower elements of the activity itself. Any pun which announces the equilibrium of physical and mental experience reflects or enacts the very process it is applied to by making the two senses apparent but inextricable:

In all distresses (except musical) where small cords are wanted,—nothing is so apt to enter a man’s head, as his hatband:——the philosophy of this is so near the surface——I scorn to enter into it.

(TS, p. 165)

The puns on “cord” quasi “chord” and on “enter a man’s head” (as meaning both the conception of an idea and the pressure of a hat-band) are a lowly but thoroughly appropriate illustration of the comic sublime. The one sense is necessary to the other both as explanation and as utterance of Obadiah’s “feelings.” The causal relation between circumstance and idea is announced by words which proclaim in themselves the inevitable ambiguity of meaning that is made in this way. At first hearing this sort of wordplay sounds frivolous and unnecessary, but it is a testimony to Sterne’s solid and coherent faith in sensationism and associationism. And as enactive prose this punning is cousin to some impressive relations. Addison praises Pope and Boileau praises Longinus for having managed to write about the sublime sublimely. Addison has in mind Pope’s clever adjustments of the sound to the sense in the Essay on Criticism, and Boileau is referring to the famous seventh section of On the Sublime. Addison calls it exemplifying “precepts in the very Precepts themselves” (Spectator, No. 253). It is the result of the idea of the object becoming so powerful and exclusive that the quality of the object invades the expression or representation of it. As Demosthenes becomes moved as he talks about an assault, he reproduces the blows in the rhythms of his oration. There is an example of this in the famous attack on Sporus in the Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot. Pope’s horror at his enemy’s ambiguous qualities mounts with each antithetical example of them until finally he calls Sporus himself “a vile Antithesis,” as if the nastiness of Sporus is so perfectly adapted to that rhetorical technique that it becomes infected with his evil and its inoffensive name is converted by association into the most opprobrious epithet Pope can think of. Less impassioned but of the same nature is Montaigne’s discovery in “Upon Some Verses of Virgil” that action and description must imitate one another. In constantly elaborating the indissoluble connexions between his mind and his body Montaigne

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evolves a style that perfectly represents the reciprocity of thought and action, idea and sensation, by slipping with a natural metaphorical ease between them until the book and Montaigne become, as he says, consubstantial, mutually illustrative. The circumscription of Montaigne's experience (dreaming that he dreams, writing that he writes) comes of bending his mind habitually to his body's experience and intensifying the natural relation of the two. Consequently it is pointless in reading his *Essays* to consider his mind as distinct from his body or his style as distinct from the unions it is imitating. In *Tristram Shandy* there are several examples of this sort of circumscription which belong, as the puns do, to the comic sublime. When Tristram plagiarizes an attack on plagiarism, invokes Cid Hamet Benengeli's Invocation, or makes a digression in the very process of writing about digressions, he is comically filling his mind with his object to the degree that description becomes part of the thing described. This tautological reflection in the very prose of the object referred to repeats the effect of puns and literalized metaphors: that of the circumstanced idea, the thing that must always attend the thought it provokes.

Although so much of Swift's wit seems to play up and down the same vertical scale as Sterne's, it always establishes differences, never identities or natural relations. In a discussion of Swift's literalized metaphors, Maurice J. Quinlan points out that it is contrast, and not association, that he is aiming for "in order to reveal an ironic disparity between the two meanings."34 The apparent resemblance between the two writers (one which Sterne claims along with the common source of Rabelais) is due perhaps to Swift's constant mockery of primitive forms of language, or at least of Baconian approaches to interpreting or imitating those forms. Whatever belongs to type, symbol, analogy, hieroglyph, sign, or mystery is a symptom of dullness and an opportunity for wit to destroy the silly symmetries and literalized notions that foolish minds invent and enjoy. And no matter how cleanly the satirical idea fits over the dunsical one (for example the modern improvement of digressions and the definition of the *satura lanx*), the test presented to the reader is to see and know the difference, and so mount to the disembodied region of the middle air whence wit makes its attacks on the dunces who sprawl in the matter of bathos, bombast, and bad magic. Rising properly, in *Tale of a Tub* at any rate, is the condition of having no lead at one's heels and of being free from material
considerations. St John of Revelations, Panurge and Jack consume holy texts in order to prophesy, but for sensible folk that sort of bibliophagy is no longer appropriate.

Although this sets Swift at a further remove than the “due distance” Sterne mentions (Letters, p. 76), it offers a clearer idea of Sterne’s real connections and affiliations. In narrative technique they are with those, like Montaigne, who learn the naturalized art of irregularity, and with Cervantes who both invents a mock-epic narrative and superintends its conversion into the comic sublime. In morality he is close to the genial and masculine sentimentalism of Fielding, who likewise appoints the upper and lower limits in which incorporated minds think and feel. Sterne’s interest in the humorist as a figure of real integrity, and in the means by which such a figure expresses himself, is closely involved with his interest in narrative and has much the same line of development, beginning with Cervantes and strengthened by the eighteenth century interest in humorism and irregularity. His physiological interest in the interaction of mind and body places Sterne quite definitely among Newtonians, and quite far from innovators of sublime styles like Chatterton, Smart and Blake whose primitivism has a more mystical basis that is, in Blake’s case, profoundly opposed to the mechanist tradition. His interest in language links Sterne with those who were exploring the growth of languages and the structure of ideas, like Warburton, Hartley and Hume; and he owes a good deal less to Locke in this respect than is often supposed. Finally, in his pursuit of the subtler forms of irregularity, a mixture of associationist wit and “sensible” language, Sterne has Longinus to instruct him in how to break rules and find others.

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FOOTNOTES


8 John Dryden, “A Discourse Concerning Satire,” II, 146.

9 Jonathan Swift, A Tale of a Tub, pp. 18, 44.


12 Ibid, X, 388. Further references to the “Postscript” will be incorporated, in parenthesis, into the text.


19 David Hartley, Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations (1749; rpt. Florida: Scholar’s Facsimiles and Reprints, 1966), I, vi.

20 Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, The Works of Edmund Burke (London: George Bell & Sons, 1902), I, 88. Further references to A Philosophical Inquiry etc. will be incorporated, in parenthesis, into the text under the abbreviation Inquiry.


24 Joseph Warton, Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope (1782; rpt. Farnborough: Gregg International Publishers, 1969), I, 291. Further references to Essay on the Genius, etc. will be incorporated, in parenthesis, into the text under the abbreviation EGWP.


Further references to “Reflections upon Laughter” will be incorporated, in parenthesis, into the text under the abbreviation “Reflections.”


28 William Warburton, The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated (London: 1837), I, 468, I, 251. Further references to The Divine Legation will be incorporated, in parenthesis, into the text under the abbreviation DLMD.


31 See “Self Knowledge,” in The Sermons of Mr Yorick, I, 41.

