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## Narrateur et lecteur dans Tristram Shandy

Aimed Ben-Hellal

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TRAVAUX  
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DE L'UMLV

LITTÉRATURES  
SCIENCES HUMAINES

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*Secrétaire de rédaction :* Thierry BONZON  
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*Conception graphique :* Michelle THOMAS et Bertrand ZAKOWETZ

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"Travaux et Recherches de l'UMLV", Université de Marne-la-vallée, Cité Descartes 5, Boulevard Descartes, 77454 Marne-la-Vallée cedex 2. (Tel. 01.60.95.70.75 ; Télécopie : 01.60.95.70.77)

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# Narrator and Reader in *Tristram Shandy* (Narrateur et lecteur dans *Tristram Shandy*)

**Aimed Ben-hellal**

## Présentation

L'article qui suit est extrait d'une étude réalisée sur *Tristram Shandy*, l'œuvre magistrale du pasteur Laurence Sterne. Publié entre 1759 et 1767, ce roman incontournable de la littérature britannique a toujours été considéré comme le plus excentrique des romans du dix-huitième siècle. Et pour cause, car les frêles conventions romanesques introduites par des écrivains aussi illustres que Daniel Defoe (l'inventeur supposé du genre nouveau), Samuel Richardson et Henry Fielding se trouvent dans cette autobiographie fictive tour à tour transgressées ou poussées vers une extrême absurdité. D'aucuns n'auront vu dans cette entreprise dévastatrice, que l'expression d'un esprit maladif et outrageusement désinvolte. La critique moderne y verra quant à elle, et à juste titre, une critique précoce et fondamentale du réalisme littéraire et de ses conventions.

Nous nous intéresserons ici particulièrement à la relation ludique qui s'installe entre le narrateur-héros Tristram et le lecteur. Cette relation, au grand désespoir du lecteur, s'établit à l'encontre du développement de l'histoire. Le projet autobiographique<sup>1</sup> lancé par Tristram ne cessera en effet d'être interrompu par une succession d'interminables digressions et d'apartés au point que les volumes s'accumuleront avant que le héros du roman ne vienne au monde. Force nous est donnée de constater que la continuité du récit importe peu au narrateur. Ce qui importe, en revanche, c'est la dialectique de jeu ! Un véritable espace interactif s'instaure où narrateur et lecteur finissent par se réconcilier.

## The illusion of a real conversation

Early in the novel, Tristram Shandy peremptorily declares that "Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation (...)" (*T.S.*, vol. 2, ch. 11, p. 77)<sup>2</sup>. This axiom will manifestly guide his writing all the way through. Tristram's discourse is

indeed built as a continuous and expansive dialogue between narrator and reader. Here and there the reader accosted and addressed in a superbly conversational style. No other novel has conferred on the concept of readership such centrality, and nowhere is the writer-reader relationship dwelt upon with such emphasis<sup>3</sup>. Novels are usually composed with no clear reference to their potential addressees and most authors write without a predefined conception of the ideal reader. *Tristram*, by contrast, has a precise idea of the exemplary audience in mind<sup>4</sup>. Now and then, he manipulates these hypothetical figures to make of this journey a lively and unforgettable encounter which “will terminate in friendship”. From the beginning to the end of the novel, *Tristram* shows infinite inventiveness to seduce the reader and retain all his attention and imagination<sup>5</sup>. We are progressively drawn out of our retreat and brought on stage to become a true character of the book, whose reactions are anticipated and closely examined. Ultimately, the interaction and impact of his fictional world upon the real reader seems to be one of Sterne’s obsessional concerns<sup>6</sup>.

In the opening chapter of the book, the narrator accosts the reader for the first time in the following manner : “— Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it (...)”. Trying to highlight the impact of the sad circumstances of his conception<sup>7</sup> upon his fate, *Tristram* immediately addresses his audience. The hero’s intimate life is shamelessly exhibited to the reader. To retain a semblance of seriousness despite the oddity of the situation, we are asked to regard this episode as central to the understanding of the story. The ice is thus forever broken and the first contact established. At this stage, *Tristram* manifestly sees his audience as an abstract and undifferentiated figure. The appellation “good folks” is usually indicative of the distance which initially separates the actor from his spectators. But this relationship will change dramatically.

No more than two chapters later, things become clearer :

“I know there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all, — who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of every thing which concerns you.” (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 4, p. 3)

*Tristram* casts his net wide. He intends to interest the most heterogeneous

people. Occasional readers as well as literature addicts are invited to bear the unfolding of the narrative with patience. The narrator has decided to begin the story ab Ovo. The way he directs his story might well be unconventional but it will in theory bring much enjoyment. Thus, we are at first defined through our activity as readers, while the neutral concepts of narrator and reader seem respected and consolidated<sup>8</sup>.

The narrator then gradually imposes his mark :

"To such [readers], however, as do not choose to go so far back into these things, I can give no better advice, than that they skip over the remaining part of this Chapter ; for I declare before hand, 'tis wrote only for the curious and inquisitive.

----- Shut the door -----

(*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 5, p. 4)

Tristram proves a bold interlocutor. He virtually assumes the right to select the type of readers that will suit him best. In doing so the narrator takes a tremendous latitude. To exist, a novel indeed crucially depends on a reader. Obviously, all this is nothing but game, and Tristram's insolence is of a kind which intrigues and attracts the reader<sup>9</sup>. A childish game consisting in flattering and encouraging the inquisitive readers is set up. If we are not part of that group, we are implicitly depreciated and asked to leave this interactive space by the door. The tone is thus irremediably set. Tristram's novel is placed under the auspices of the subtle engagement and the pleasurable game. A relationship reminiscent of the kind existing between an artisan and his apprentice, or guide and his disciple, is established.

In order to pacify his disciples and initiate them in absolute serenity and mutual confidence, Tristram holds out the prospect of something to be learned :

"(...) if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road, — or should sometimes put on a fool's cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along, — don't fly off, — but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside ; — and as we jogg on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do any thing, — only keep your temper." (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 6, p. 6-7).

Tristram intimates that beneath the deceiving appearances of mad writing

are hidden valuable secrets. Accordingly, we are politely asked to read through the most ludicrous episodes of the book with amused patience. Tristram's rhetoric is here most seductive and conciliatory. It should be noted that the reading of *Tristram Shandy* is clearly assimilated to a journey, as the words "road", "pass along" and "jogg on" indicate. The passage echoes, in a broad sense, the famous prologue of *Gargantua* in which the illustrious Rabelais requires of his audience absolute attention :

"Car vous dites vous-mêmes que l'habit ne fait point le moine; et tel a revêtu un habit monacal, qui n'est en dedans rien moins que moine, et tel a revêtu une cape espagnole, qui, au fond du cœur, ne doit rien à l'Espagne. C'est pourquoi il faut ouvrir le livre et soigneusement peser ce qui est exposé. C'est alors que vous vous rendrez compte que l'ingrédient contenu dedans est de bien autre valeur que ne le promettait la boîte ; c'est à dire que les matières traitées ici ne sont pas aussi frivoles que, au-dessus, le titre le laissait présumer"<sup>10</sup>.

Both novels, at times, reach climaxes of seriousness under the cover of jokes and laughter. Debates are initiated and famous figures satirised. Pleasurable delectation is thus offered to whoever learns to read between the lines<sup>11</sup>.

Chapter six, volume one, exemplifies the growing familiarity between narrator and reader. The latter is variably referred to as "you", "Sir" or "my dear friend and companion". Everything is done to build up an atmosphere of conviviality<sup>12</sup>. The use of the "I" and "you" pronouns punctuates the whole chapter to convey the idea of exchange. Tristram goes even further and sets his personal objectives :

"As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity ; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship. — *O diem præclarum!* — then nothing which has touched me will be thought trifling in its nature, or tedious in its telling" (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 6, p. 6).

Friendship is the narrator's ultimate aim. This, of course, is not gratuitous. Tristram's intention is to get the reader so deeply involved in the book that he will empathise with the unfortunate protagonist. The crafty narrator is thinking, in anticipation, of a way to remove all potential objections and



reluctance on the reader's behalf. As nobody would openly criticise a friend and accordingly be at fault, Tristram hopes that the reader will show the same loyalty. Thus chapter six clearly appears as the opening round of familiarisation. Once Tristram considers that his relationship with his audience is strong enough and that they have become sufficiently intimate, the number and frequency of the apostrophes is impressively increased. Clive T. Probyn, quoting Mary S. Wagoner, says in this regard :

"Tristram addresses the reader approximately three hundred and fifty times during the course of the book, as 'My Lord', 'Jenny', 'Madam', 'your worship', 'my dear anti-Shandean, and thrice able critics, and fellow labourers . . . subtle statesmen and discreet doctor', 'Julia', 'your reverences', and 'gentry', for example. It is as though the reader has invaded the book and Tristram's confidence in a single statement rest on determining the unknown readership"<sup>13</sup>.

This considered, we might safely infer that the concept of readership is significantly manipulated in *Tristram Shandy*. And this process of steady exploitation of the reader's identity is a source of dynamism and movement. This identity is stripped of what makes a personality and an individuality, namely its sexual and social status. It is as if Tristram wanted to explore the many varied potentialities that his audience could offer for the establishing of an interactive game<sup>14</sup>. Tristram's behaviour, we will see, differs according to changes in the identity of his imaginary reader.

From chapter six on, the range of reader identities becomes wider and more varied. "In the space of four chapters (vii-x) in book one", as Lodwick Hartley puts it, "the putative reader or hearer is addressed as 'your worship', 'Sir', 'my Lord', and 'Madam'"<sup>15</sup>. In volume four, chapter seventeen, the reader is accosted as "dear Sir", "Madam", "your reverences and your worships" etc... In short, appellations abound, as though Tristram were ill at ease without putting a name on the reader's undifferentiated face<sup>16</sup>. We are offered the privilege of witnessing the most intimate scenes involving the Shandys, and invited to share Tristram's most secret feelings and apprehensions. What is more, we find ourselves engaged in discussions of a series of topics, including, as we will see in the next sections, how the narrative itself should be conducted. Accordingly we may wonder whether

the autobiographical project could come to an end, or even if it would make sense, without the reader's involvement<sup>17</sup>.

The following passage perfectly illustrates how the reader is repeatedly accosted by the narrator :

"Your son! — your dear son, — from whose sweet temper you have so much to expect. — Your Billy, Sir! — would you, for the world, have called him Judas? — Would you, my dear Sir, he would say, laying his hand upon your breast, with the genteelest address (...) — Would you, Sir, if a Jew of a godfather had proposed the name for your child, and offered you his purse along with it, would you have consented to such a desecration of him ?" (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 19, p. 37)

Pleading in favour of his father's theory about the influence of names on the destiny of new-born children, Tristram addresses the reader in the liveliest manner. Exclamation and question marks punctuate the whole passage to convey an impression of lively exchanges. As he tries to demonstrate the validity of Walter's viewpoint, Tristram humorously implicates the reader and, what is more, the reader's son "Billy". To make his point the narrator stages a tailor-made reader (and his son), for the space of a single representation and asks him if he would have accepted to christen his hypothetical son with the name of Judas. Obviously he would not, and the virtual discussion comes to an end.

But the most ludicrous dialogues by far are those involving Tristram and Madam reader. Helen Ostovich says indeed that the "liveliest, most disputatious relationship in the novel is the one between Tristram and his female reader, Madam"<sup>18</sup>. These disputes parallel the Shandys' hectic relationships. By contrast, "Tristram usually treats Sir — his male reader — with casual indifference, and showers his powerful or fashionable readers, whether secular or clerical — "your worships" and "your reverences" — with genial contempt"<sup>19</sup>. Tristram's personal hobby-horse seems to be embodied by Madam reader. And all sexual allusiveness is of course permitted. Let us therefore examine one of those passages in which the imaginary female reader is teased by Tristram.

In volume one, chapter twenty, a humorous dialogue is staged :

"— How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last

chapter? I told you in it, *That my mother was not a papist*. — Papist! You told me no such thing, Sir. Madam, I beg leave to repeat it over again, That I told you as plain, at least, as words, by direct inference, could tell you such a thing. — Then, Sir, I must have miss'd a page. — No, Madam, — you have not miss'd a word. Then I was asleep, Sir. — My pride, Madam, cannot allow you that refuge. — Then, I declare, I know nothing about the matter. — That, Madam, is the very fault I lay to your charge; and as a punishment for it, I do insist upon it, that you immediately turn back, that is, as soon as you get to the next full stop, and read the whole chapter over again." (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 20, p. 40-41)

The narrator manifestly introduces the female reader in order to chastise her. He pretends to catch her out. This virtual dispute significantly revolves around the act of reading. Once again, dashes, exclamation and question marks are multiplied to express the idea of a real dialogue. The use of the present tense further gives the semblance of immediacy. Tristram shows himself quite an authoritarian narrator, who gives Madam orders, and charges her with inattentive reading. But the impudent reader proves herself a formidable adversary capable of retorting. The bone of contention, if it might be called so, is as often as not connected with religion. The existing dissension between the Protestant and Catholic churches is indeed constantly used as a source of humour in *Tristram Shandy*. Did Tristram really say that his mother was not Catholic, and in what circumstances? Actually, the point is not as important as Tristram would have it, even though he insists that his honour as a captivating writer is at stake. The aim, through this theatrical game, is to get the reader more involved in the narrative and to give him a lesson in reading.

Tristram then seizes the opportunity to remind us that he writes for didactic purposes :

"— 'Tis to rebuke a vicious taste which has crept into thousands besides herself, — of reading straight forward, more in quest of the adventures, than of the deep erudition and knowledge which a book of this cast, if read over as it should be, would infallibly impart with them." (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 20, p. 41)<sup>20</sup>

As usual Tristram never wastes an opportunity to underline and defend the specificity of his book. Deep erudition and superficial adventures are here opposed. Tristram claims that his book is of a quality which contrasts with earlier novels centred around simple adventures and simple plots. Perhaps *Tom Jones*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and other adventure novels of this type are being pointed at ? At any rate, Tristram is denouncing a pernicious contemporary trend which consists in reading only in search of easy adventures. Since he is writing to instruct, a method to correct our reprehensible behaviour is offered. Like Madam reader, we should learn to read by concentrating on the multiple meanings of words. In short, we are asked to reread the book and meditate on Tristram's prose.

The illusion of a lively dialogue clearly stems from Tristram's so-called conversational style<sup>21</sup>. Talk is indeed simulated in each of the written sentences of *Tristram Shandy*, and the whole artistry of the book lies in the skilful conversion of the written prose into an oral equivalent. Punctuation marks are in effect borrowed from written language and subverted to support the narrator's voice. However, it is a strange paradox that Tristram's prose appears a priori to be structurally ill-adapted to convey the fluidity and simplicity of oral exchanges. The sentences often seem too long and syntactically too complex to do that. What is more, his writing reveals too much premeditation and concise calculation to communicate the special easiness and approximation of oral dialogues<sup>22</sup>. What then gives *Tristram Shandy* the aspect of an endless and captivating oral performance ? The answer is clear : the punctuation marks. Question and exclamation marks, commas, semicolons, asterisks, and of course the famous Shandean dash, give Tristram's speech its special rhythm. William Holtz, for instance, states that :

"Sterne's dash seems to function as the graphic expression of the nuances of gesture inherent in language at its best; stitching through and through the pages of talk it constantly suggests the something else, and that is the *presence* of the talker — the implicit substructure of tone, accent, rhythm, gesture, and expression, all highly personal and charged with dramatic power"<sup>23</sup>.

Of course, all of these ingenuous artifices would not function without the

reader's necessary participation. As long as we enter the narrator's fictional sphere the game is viable. The reader is to take his assigned seat and remove from his imagination all impeding barriers. Then and then only Tristram's voice and the reader's consciousness commune, annihilating all distance — temporal distance in particular. Past, fictional time<sup>24</sup> and present are merged. Laurence Sterne and his future readers are bound together through Tristram's speech. And Tristram-hero is brought to life thanks to the narrator's constant remembering. This narrator is shown rummaging through a distant past (a fictional past), to the reader's delight. The latter, a real being, is fictionalised and virtually dragged into old-Tristram's narrative. As long as we, readers, accept to take the place of Madam reader or Sir the critic, the illusion of a real discussion is effective. Thus, the semblance of realism is not achieved through the telling of the protagonist's life, which is too disrupted, but through his opinions and numerous comments. Language is the stage on which narrator and reader encounter each other.

## The narrator-guide

If Tristram, as we have seen, tries by any means possible to engage a dialogue with the reader, it is not merely to enliven his reading of the book. Once the illusion of lively exchanges has been initiated, the narrator uses this channel of familiarity to deliver his instructions and eventually take control of the reader's imagination. He will behave as a guide who must educate and provide easy hints to the corrupted reader. For *Tristram Shandy* is an innovative novel which works with its own internal rules. The writing seems to unfold at the same pace as the protagonist's consciousness, and to be at least as unpredictable. The complex process of association of ideas inherent to this novel ruins the formal continuity of the narrative. Accordingly, the reader would be inevitably lost if the narrator did not at times give advice and direct his attention in the right way. "— The mind should be accustomed to make wise reflections, and draw curious conclusions as it goes along (...)", Tristram says<sup>25</sup>. We are thus clearly told that a lesson in reading will ensue. Strange as this lesson may be, the rea-

der is required to surrender to it. The narrator, of course, shows himself to be ironically aware of the eccentric nature of his novel.

In volume one, chapter nineteen, Tristram for instance characteristically pretends to fear the reader's reactions to the unusual course of the narrative :

"I fear the reader (...) if he is the least of a choleric temper, will immediately throw the book by; if mercurial, he will laugh most heartily at it ; — and if he is of grave and saturnine cast, he will at first sight, absolutely condemn as fanciful and extravagant". (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 19, p. 36)

The narrator tries to pre-empt the numerous criticisms to come. He imagines three types of readers whose attitudes to the book vary according to their respective tempers. The medieval belief in the power of humours is clearly hinted at. The ideal reader is the second one, who most resembles the protagonist. Significantly, Tristram already foresees that his book will be widely condemned. Will this apprehension ultimately affect his writing? The answer is obvious. Tristram is a strong-willed character, whose manly qualities manifest themselves only in his writing. However, he always tries to justify his writing to whoever is willing to listen, as in the following excerpt :

"(...) Sir — for in good truth, when a man is telling a story in the strange way I do mine, he is obliged continually to be going backwards and forwards to keep all tight together in the reader's fancy — which for my own part, if I did not take heed to do more than at first, there is so much unfixed and equivocal matter starting up, with so many breaks and gaps in it, — and so little service do the stars afford, which, nevertheless, I hang up in some of the darkest passages, knowing that the world is apt to lose its way, with all the lights the sun itself at noon day can give it — and now, you see, I am lost myself !" (*T.S.*, vol. 6, ch. 33, p. 325)

In this passage, the narrator gets deeply involved in describing all the pains he takes to keep the reader from getting lost in the rambling developments of the narrative. The narrator puts himself in a predominant position, as the repetition of the "I" pronoun shows. Tristram takes things in hand to expound and reiterate the principles which lie behind his storytelling. But things get immediately ludicrous when, in the course of this authoritative demonstration, he gets lost. Naturally, this is humorously meant to

exemplify and illustrate the complexity of his explanatory undertaking. However, two points clearly stand out. In order to be able to relate his strange stories, Tristram will have to go back and forth, distorting the line of the narrative with “breaks” and “gaps”. This eccentric process bears obvious sexual connotations. The word “fancy”, here especially directed to the male reader, has indeed a dubious meaning. And once again, Tristram pretends to have no control over the narrative. Each of his numerous attempts to justify his art characteristically ends in an admission of powerlessness. The stars that he humorously refers to are certainly those asterisks, which instead of concealing words, and much against Tristram’s apparent will, reveal equivocal matters. In the paragraph, then, the narrator proves himself quite aware of the peculiarity of his work, and pretends, just like the reader, to suffer from this state of things.

The only way out Tristram proposes is, as we saw earlier, absolute engagement :

“I would go fifty miles on foot, for I have not a horse worth riding on, to kiss the hand of that man whose generous heart will give up the reins of his imagination into his author’s hands, — be pleased he knows not why, and cares not wherefore.” (*T.S.*, vol. 3, ch. 12, p. 133)

The narrator appeals to our sentiments in order to get control of our imagination. He manifestly intends to seduce the reader by flattering him. The passage reaches here a climax of familiarity. Tristram proposes to kiss the reader’s hand, at the risk of putting himself in the position of a simple jester. At the same time he introduces himself as our devoted guide, as the words “his author” indicate. No critical latitude is thus left to us if we actually surrender to this compromising proposal<sup>26</sup>. Elsewhere, Tristram reiterates his bargain :

“— Here — pray, Sir, take hold of my cap, — nay, take the bell along with it, and my pantouffles too.

— Now, Sir, they are all at your service; and I freely make you a present of ’em, on condition, you give me all your attention to this chapter”. (*T.S.*, vol. 3, ch. 18, p. 137)

Tristram is recurrently seen requiring the reader’s attentiveness. As he would give everything to get this precious treasure, he may certainly indul-

ge in offering his pantoufles. Whenever abstract principles and theories do not suffice, the narrator resorts to practical devices in order to clarify things. In the very first chapter of the book, for instance, Tristram asks the unexpected question: "Pray, what was your father saying ?"<sup>27</sup>. As he is depicting the amusing circumstances of his procreation, the narrator wants to make sure that the readers can easily assess the oddity and incongruity of the situation. Tristram takes the place of a fictitious reader to emphasise the comic side of this inaugurating episode.

In volume one, chapter twenty-one, Tristram invents a dialogue with Madam reader :

"(...) — no, he got it, Madam, by a blow. — A blow! — Yes, Madam, it was owing to a blow from a stone, broke off by a ball from the parapet of horn-work at the siege of Namur, which struck full upon my uncle Toby's groin". (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 21, 48)

Here the narrator pretends to correct the reader's preconceived assumptions about Uncle Toby. The matter, as often, is equivocal. He explains simply that Toby's hurt on the groin occurred during the battle of Namur. As usual, things are initially blurred by Tristram, to be cleared up parsimoniously and only gradually.

Sometimes the reader's imagination seems totally manipulated by the narrator's directive instructions :

" 'Tis his turn now ; — I have given an ample description of Dr. Slop's sad overthrow, and of his sad appearance in the back parlour ; — [the reader's] imagination must now go on with it for a while. Let the reader imagine then, that Dr. Slop has told his tale ; — and in what words , and with what aggravations his fancy chooses : — Let him suppose that Obadiah has told his tale also, and with such rueful looks of affected concern, as he thinks will best contrast the two figures as they stand by each other : Let him imagine, that my father has stepp'd up stairs to see my mother : — And to conclude this work of imagination, — let him imagine the doctor wash'd, —rubb'd down, — condoled with, — felicitated, — got into a pair of Obadiah's pumps, stepping forwards towards the door, upon the very point of entering upon action". (*T.S.*, vol. 2, ch. 11, p. 77-78)



Before this point in the narrative Mrs Shandy had begun labour, and Obadiah had been ordered to fetch Dr. Slop, the obstetrician. On his way to Shandy Hall, Dr. Slop had fallen from his pony into the mud as a result of a collision with Obadiah. Having previously depicted these ludicrous episodes, the narrator now asks the reader's imagination to take over for the representation of the following scenes. In an impersonal but directive manner, we are left to represent to ourselves Dr. Slop's account of the incident. Though the content of his speech is not given, the tone is suggested. We may easily infer the harsh reproaches directed to Obadiah the manservant. Tristram intimates that we enjoy the freedom to choose the various elements composing the scene: Dr. Slop into a pair of "Obadiah's clean pumps", the servant's pitiful expressions, Walter standing on the doorstep of his bedroom. But this freedom is illusory, since the scenario is already written. Actually, Tristram seems to be experimenting with an alternative way of narrating his story, a process through which the illusion of active and free participation is built up.

However willing to offer his readers relative latitude to imagine and represent things to themselves, Tristram shows that he is determined to lead the narrative his own way :

“— But courage ! gentle reader ! — I scorn it — 'tis enough to have thee in my power — but to make use of the advantage which the fortune of the pen has now gained over thee, would be too much.” (*T.S.*, vol. 7, ch. 6, p. 340)

The narrator-author is manifestly eager to clarify and readjust his relationship with the reader. We are ironically reminded of his omnipotence and of our fragile dependence. However conciliatory and friendly Tristram may appear at times to the reader, he has no intention of giving up his royal advantage. This type of declaration, expressing the narrator's sovereignty, is not exceptional but rather recurrent in the novel. Another instance of this kind can be found in volume one, chapter twenty-five, where Tristram, addressing the reader, boldly declares : “(...) if I thought you was able to form the least judgement or probable conjecture to yourself, of what was to come in the next page, — I would tear it out of my book”. Thus, aggressiveness alternates with exaggerated courtesy to emphasise the inacces-

sibility and unpredictability of Tristram's creativity. We are bluntly told that without Tristram's indisputable leadership the journey could not continue.

Tristram's guidance is all the more necessary when the naive reader finds himself confronted with bawdy passages. Here and there, indeed, sexual innuendoes and double entendres abound. These jokes, made at the reader's expense, are sometimes so subtle that their signification might pass unnoticed. A great deal of the humour of the book would thus irremediably vanish. If the narrator did not take pains to ostentatiously arouse our suspicion, it would simply be farewell to much of the game in *Tristram Shandy*. But Sterne contrives to exploit sexual innuendoes to a certain limit and no farther, leaving room for the reader to recover all the implied meaning. As often, the novel would not function without our attentive participation<sup>28</sup>.

In volume three, chapter thirty one, Tristram defines a nose :

"I define a nose, as follows, — intreating only beforehand, and beseeching my readers, both male and female, of what age, complexion and condition soever, for the love of God and their own souls, to guard against the temptations and suggestions of the devil, and suffer him by no art or wile to put into my definition. — For by the word Nose, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word Nose occurs, I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less". (*T.S.*, vol. 3, ch. 31, p. 159)

In this chapter Tristram wishes to explain how bountiful nature has mischievously equipped his ancestors, and in particular the male line of the house of the Shandys, with small noses. As a result of this injustice, Tristram's grandfather has notably been required by his wife to pay a jointure of three hundred pounds a year. The reason she put forwards was, namely, that he had "little or no nose" at all. So before going further, the narrator intends to clarify things by giving a crystal clear definition of as trivial a word as "nose". But by emphatically insisting on the word, occurring five times and thrice with a capital letter in this passage, things obviously turn another way. While pretending to escape popular connotations, Tristram is the one who plays the role of the tempting devil. We are thus frankly encouraged to replace the word "nose" by phallus each time it

appears “throughout this long chapter of noses and in every other part of [the] work”. This example is representative of the manner in which we are often induced to understand Tristram’s words tendentiously rather than neutrally.

From all the above examined passages it seems clear that Tristram behaves like a veritable guide to the reader. He offers us an unprecedented insight into the novel by requiring our imaginative participation. This relationship is viable as long as Tristram’s authority is not questioned. Aggressiveness sometimes follows affected courtesy, to remind us that in the space of the reading we are nothing but artificial beings, victims of a skilful manipulator.

## The reader-assistant

Far from contenting himself with guiding the naive reader in his labyrinth, the narrator explicitly urges his audience to participate in the very fabric of the book. The novel is conceived as an interactive space where the narrator puts on the cap of the magician who requires the active collaboration of a devoted accomplice to achieve his conjuring tricks<sup>29</sup>. The reader is naturally invited to share all the secrets of the trade. Thus whenever a tough task is in view, like that of clearing the stage for the smooth continuation of the show, or of drawing a portrait of one of the characters, the reader’s participation is solicited. The game is brought to such an extremity that it seems quite impossible to read the novel without participating.

In the following passage for instance, Tristram pretends to be writing in such a hurry that he cannot devote a single minute to clarifying an obscure reference :

“— Pray what was that man’s name, — for I write in such a hurry, I have no time to recollect or look for it, — who first made the observation, “That there was great inconstancy in our air and climate ? ”  
Whoever he was, ’twas a just and good observation in him” (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 21, p. 45-46).

The reader is clearly delegated the task of elucidating the name of that illustrious figure. He is to cover up for the narrator’s failing, as a faithful

assistant would. Tristram is referring to the popular, though obscure, belief that the English climate contributes to the eccentricity of its inhabitants, in order to flesh out the coming depiction of the Shandean household<sup>30</sup>. High erudition is of course affected. Tristram's ignorance humorously refers to that of his audience. To pacify the frustrated reader and reward his vain potential investigations, the narrator concludes that whoever the man was, only the idea matters.

In volume one, chapter eleven, Tristram, to avoid further digressions, exhorts the reader to consult in his place a book, the references of which are precisely given :

"It has often come into my head, that this post could be no other than that of the king's chief jester ; — and that *Hamlet's Yorick*, in our *Shakespeare*, many of whose plays, you know are founded upon authenticated facts, — was certainly the very man.

I have no time to look into *Saxo-Grammaticus's Danish* history, to know the certainty of this ; — but if you have leisure, and can easily get at the book, you may do it full as well yourself" (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 11, p. 16).

At this point in the story, the narrator is introducing the famous figure of Parson Yorick into his autobiography, and conjectures that this man was descended from the Yorick who was a member of Hamlet's court in Denmark. Pretending once again that he has no time to waste, Tristram encourages the reader to verify this assumption. Exploring other texts is thus presented as an integral part of the reading of *Tristram Shandy*. To bring the reading of Tristram's novel to full completion, we are here emblematically invited to open other books, to knock at other doors. Actually cross-references, which are exemplified a thousand times in the text, are an important key to the functioning of the novel. The narrator unscrupulously delegates the responsibility of clarifying his work to the reader<sup>31</sup>. He significantly presents himself as an overworked writer while the reader is implicitly introduced as an idle figure who virtually needs exercise. Reading, Tristram intimates, should not at any rate be a passive and static activity.

Tristram goes much farther when he solicits the reader's help and benevolence to get his father and uncle off the stairs :

“Holla ! — you chairman ! — here’s sixpence — do step into that bookseller’s shop, and call me a day-tall critick. I am very willing to give any one of ’em a crown to help me with his tackling, to get my father and my uncle Toby off the stairs, and to put them to bed” (*T.S.*, vol. 4, ch.13, p. 206).

By underlining the difficulty of getting his father and uncle down the stairs, Tristram foregrounds his authorial difficulties. Unwilling to simply drop the curtain on the scene as most writers would do, he draws the reader’s attention to the artificiality of realist practices. How is indeed an author to manage the delicate transition between two distinct scenes ? Is there a universally recommended manner to deal with the problem ? Tristram symbolically appeals to the reader who, for the occasion, takes on the role of a critic. He is invited to tackle the thing for a single crown reward, to intervene on the fictional level as though he were part of it. The reader is thus progressively fictionalised and denatured to meet the requirements of Tristram’s novel<sup>32</sup>.

Elsewhere in the novel, the reader is urged to help the puzzled stage-director to clear the stage :

“I beg the reader will assist me here, to wheel off my uncle Toby’s ordnance behind the scenes, — to remove his sentry-box, and clear the theatre, if possible, of horn-works and half moons, and get the rest of his military apparatus out of the way ; — that done (...) we’ll snuff the candles bright, — sweep the stage with a new broom, — draw up the curtain, and exhibit my uncle Toby dressed in a new character (...)” (*T.S.*, vol. 6, ch. 29, p. 320-321).

Here again Tristram pretends to be absolutely helpless. Alone, he has not managed to change the scene drastically, and the reader is politely asked to lend a hand to move the scenery and prepare the stage for the opening of uncle Toby’s love campaign. Tristram’s theatre is of a transparent kind. Stage and backstage coexist simultaneously and are made visible at once to the reader, who is no longer considered as a stranger. The traditional mechanisms of theatrical transitions and movements are minutely dissected. Tristram shows himself well-aware of the secret rituals of the trade. As the focus is on the technical aspect of the matter, the transition in question is

automatically made in our mind and we are ready for uncle Toby's entrance.

The reader, then, is symbolically made an active participant in the unfolding of the narrative, and here and there is humorously asked to enter the fictional world of *Tristram Shandy* to assist the inexperienced writer. What is more, he is often depicted as Tristram's confidant and accomplice, sharing the Shandys' most intimate secrets :

"(...) you shall step with me, Madam, behind the curtain, only to hear in what kind of manner my father and my mother debated between themselves, this affair of the breeches, — from which you may form an idea, how they debated all lesser matters" (*T.S.*, vol. 6, ch.16, p. 307).

Tristram prepares to take the reader to the scene of discussion. All the humorous scenes involving the Shandys or "beds of justice", intimate as they may be, are in fact depicted for the reader. We constantly find ourselves in the position of voyeurs, offered an exposing view of the characters. Tristram has decided to spare no detail of his autobiography to his journeying companion.

Sometimes the author goes as far as virtually to give his place to the experienced reader by leaving out words, sentences and parts of paragraphs, and signalling them by way of dashes, asterisks or blanks. Forced to try and guess what meaning the writer is trying to convey, the reader appropriates the text and reconstructs it. The act of reading thus bears something of the creativity of writing. Tristram justifies this situation in the following terms :

"The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.

For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own." (*T.S.*, vol. 2, ch. 11, p. 77).

This declaration, surprising as it is, sounds like a clear division of responsibility.

In the famous passage relating Tristram's circumcision, for instance, the reader is forced to work out the meaning of the asterisks:

"The chamber-maid had left no \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\* under the bed : — Cannot

you contrive, master, quoth Susannah, lifting up the sash with one hand, as she spoke, and helping me up into the window seat with the other, — cannot you manage, my dear, for a single time to \*\*\*\* \* \* \* \*  
 \*\*\* \* \* \* \* ?" (*T.S.*, vol. 5, ch. 17, p. 264).

In this excerpt it seems relatively easy to guess the indelicate words covered by the typographical marks. A chamber pot was certainly missing under Tristram's bed. The urgency of the situation has consequently driven Susannah to invite little Tristram to piss out of the window. The deduction of the exact wording is here made easier by the number of asterisks used, each asterisk corresponding to a letter.

In another passage, by contrast, it is far more difficult to find the exact missing words :

" — Lord have mercy upon me, — said my father to himself  
 \_\_\_\* \* \* \* \*  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 \* \* \* \* \*

(*T.S.*, vol. 6, ch. 39, p. 332-333)

The reader is offered no hints, and there seems to be no clear correlation between the number of asterisks and the letters that constitute the missing words. Consequently, the reader is left a real freedom to imagine what Walter thinks of Toby's match with Mrs. Wadman, and of their begetting children. We know too well Mr. Shandy's opinion as regards matrimony and the upbringing of children to be completely misled. The context is explicit enough to exclude the necessity of going into details. The narrator thus relies on our knowledge of Walter's personality to deduce the rest of the paragraph.

In volume seven, chapter thirty-seven, Tristram invites the reader to a surrealistic exercise :

"When the first transport was over, and the registers of the brain were beginning to get a little out of the confusion into which this jumble of cross accidents had cast them — it then presently occur'd to me, that I had left my remarks in the pocket of the chaise — and that in selling my chaise, I had sold my remarks along with it, to the chaise-

vamper. I leave this void space that the reader may swear into it, any oath that he is accustomed to — (*T.S.*, vol. 7, ch. 37, p. 372).

This passage occurs while Tristram is recounting one of the small incidents which occurred during a journey through the south of France. After a ludicrous dispute with a French commissary about the fees to be paid for a coach trip he has cancelled, Tristram collects his wits and realises that he has lost his notebook. A blank is left for the reader, who is naturally expected to share the narrator's frustration and to swear into it. Once again, he is expected to fill in the text. This time his oral participation is needed to complete the written text. Speech and writing, sound and space are here juxtaposed to create the oddest effect. But this comes as no surprise since Tristram constantly vindicates the claim that writing is simply another name for conversation.

This interactive game reaches a climax when Tristram offers the reader an immaculate page with which to draw his own picture of the Widow Wadman :

“To conceive this right, — call for pen and ink — here's paper ready to your hand. — Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind — as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you — 'tis all one to me — please but your own fancy.” (*T.S.*, vol. 6, ch. 38, p. 330)

The medium now chosen by Tristram to bring the reader into his novel is drawing<sup>33</sup>. As usual, half of the entertainment (here taking the form of a blank page) is offered by the narrator. The other half depends on the reader's willingness to commit himself to the task. If paper and ink meet, Tristram wins his bet and the show goes on. This artistic exercise could in fact serve as an assessment of the degree of the reader's involvement in the novel. At the same time, it is a clear transferring to the reader of the writer's anguishing responsibility to fertilise the virgin page. Along with the surprising black and marbled pages situated much earlier in the novel, this blank space left to the reader is one of the oddest irregularities in *Tristram Shandy*. It is also a reminder that a novel is a material object.

All things considered, we might say that Laurence Sterne gives the reader of *Tristram Shandy* an unrivalled prominence. By obsessively manipu-



lating the idea of readership as he pleases, he shows that a book is first and foremost an object directed to an audience. To seduce the distant reader, thanks to whom alone the book exists, why not introduce him into the fiction and give him things to do? Unpassable barriers, of course, forbid this idealistic communion. But the author's intentions are far less naive. The idea is, in fact, to plunge the reader into a virtual world where he has the impression of being the object of all the writer's attention. The emphasis is on the psychological experience. Our interest in the novel is enhanced as the intimate narrator reveals to us the secrets of his trade. Functioning as a parody of traditional novels, *Tristram Shandy*, indeed, constantly deconstructs the illusion of reality. Nowhere else is the reader educated in so lively a manner. In this sense Sterne's book becomes a "novel of education", a novel which teaches us to read.<sup>34</sup>

**Aimed Ben hellal**

## Notes

- 1 Un projet autobiographique affiché par le titre même du roman, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*.
- 2 From here on, "T.S." will stand for *Tristram Shandy* and will refer to the Norton Critical edition of *Tristram Shandy*, New-York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1980.
- 3 Lodwick Hartley asserts that "no other writer of fiction in the [eighteenth] century was able to engage and further exploit the reader in the same way that Sterne does." Lodwick Hartley, "The Genius of Laurence Sterne", in *Tristram Shandy*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1980, p. 495.
- 4 Henri Fluchère comments : "C'est un aveu implicite que le livre n'existe pas en soi, dans l'impersonnalité indifférente de l'œuvre d'art, mais qu'il recevra son sens et pourra remplir sa fonction d'après l'accueil qui lui sera fait.(...) Ainsi, Sterne, comme ses devanciers, n'a que faire de l'isolement de l'artiste, et le héros avec lequel il s'identifie provisoirement aura toujours une conscience aiguë du lecteur, avec lequel il s'efforcera d'établir des rapports de sympathie — pour ne pas dire une connivence — et de la conserver jusqu'à la fin." Henri Fluchère, *Laurence Sterne : De l'homme à l'œuvre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1961, p. 235.
- 5 As a writer, Roland Barthes asserts that to insure the reader a pleasurable reading, "il faut que je le cherche (que je le "drague"), sans savoir où il est. Un espace de la jouissance est alors créé. Ce n'est pas la "personne" de l'autre qui m'est nécessaire, c'est l'espace : la possibilité d'une dialectique du désir, d'une imprévision de la jouissance : que les jeux ne soient pas faits, qu'il y ait un jeu." Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1973, p. 10-11. Seducing the potential reader is literally what Tristram does.
- 6 Richard A. Lanham says in this regard that "Tristram's concern for sales is in the book. Sterne's concern for fame is in the *Letters*, in everything he ever wrote". Richard A. Lanham, *Tristram Shandy : The Games of Pleasure*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973, p. 127.
- 7 On the evening of Tristram's conception, Mrs Shandy asks her husband a silly question. The frustration it causes in Tristram's father has a negative influence on the "animal spirits". As a result of this unfortunate incident, "the foundations have been led for a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind (in the child to come), which no skill of the physician or the philosopher could ever afterwards have set thoroughly to rights." (*T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 2, p. 3).
- 8 These roles are usually only implicitly acknowledged.
- 9 Helen Ostovich asserts that the aim lying behind all the apparent disputes between narrator and reader "[is] not mere domination of the reader, but stimulation and provocation, the equal engagement of writer and reader in the creative journeying through the novel". Helen Ostovich, "Reader as Hobby-Horse in *Tristram Shandy*", *Tristram Shandy*, Houndmills, New Casebooks, 1992, p. 155.
- 10 François Rabelais, *Gargantua*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1996 (1ère éd. : 1535), p. 49.
- 11 Richard A. Lanham says in this regard that "within the unprepossessing Silenus box [a clear reference to the prologue of *Gargantua*] lurks real philosophic wisdom. We seek it out. And are mocked for that. We are damned if we do and damned if we don't. (...) Thus we must constantly search for a key, a basis for interpretation [of *Tristram Shandy*], and feel silly for doing so". Richard A. Lanham, *Tristram Shandy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
- 12 James E. Swearingen writes : "Tristram is a convivial person whose spirit of jovial companionship, evoked in the company of his reader, is one of the characteristic features of the book." James E. Swearingen, *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy : An Essay in Phenomenological Criticism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 88.
- 13 Clive T. Probyn, "A Form for Self-Realization : Laurence Sterne", *English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century 1700-1789*, London, Longman, 1987, p. 134.

- 14 Lodwick Hartley says in this regard : "It is no secret that a large part of the suspense and, therefore, the attraction of the novel lies in our wondering not merely what the narrator is going to do next but also into what role he is going to trick the reader — whose sex, status, and point of view are changeable at the narrator's whim. Thus the device of the shifting putative reader or hearer becomes a kind of game that the author-narrator (...) plays with the one who actually has the novel in his hands". Lodwick Hartley, "The Genius of ...", *op. cit.* , p. 495.
- 15 *op. cit.*, p. 495.
- 16 Patricia Meyer Spacks writes that "[t]he direct comments Fielding and Tristram make about their readers express not only optimism but anxiety. Granted common values, attitudes, and assumptions, readers yet remain unpredictable, individual beings ; no faith in human nature can assure a writer of precisely the response he wishes or ensure him against conceivable negative judgement". Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self : Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 304.
- 17 James E. Swearingen says : "(...) Tristram is no solipsistic product of isolation. But his audience (...) is as important to his project of self-explication as are the Shandys and must be brought right into the game". James E. Swearingen, *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy...*, *op. cit.* , p. 88.
- 18 Helen Ostovich, "Reader as...", *op. cit.* , p.156.
- 19 *loc cit.*
- 20 Howard Anderson states that : "[t]he primary device of [Tristram's] method of instruction is to make us doubt the imaginative faculties that we have relied on to carry us through this narrative (as they've done through many others), and also to make us see that we are dominated by preconceptions that are inadequate for a full interpretation of the unfamiliar circumstances that we find ourselves in." Howard Anderson, "Tristram Shandy and the Reader's Imagination", *Tristram Shandy*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1980, p. 612-613.
- 21 Virginia Woolf writes in this regard that Sterne's punctuation "is that of speech, not writing, and [that] it brings the sounds and associations of the speaking voice in with it." Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, series 2, London, 1932, p. 79, as quoted by Eugene Hnatko in "Sterne's Conversational Style", *The Winged Skull: Papers from the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference*, London, Methuen, 1971, p. 229.
- 22 Eugene Hnatko defines the characteristics of oral conversation as follows : "The qualities of the conversational style more likely are those we assume broadly to characterize spontaneous talk as different from writing, oratory, or incantation : a less complicated or elaborate syntax and often indeed an abrogation of it ; a heavier reliance on the fortuitous than on the foreseen in ordering (...) and finally a reliance upon a non-verbal context for part of the meaning (...)". Eugene Hnatko "Sterne's conversational ...", *op. cit.* , p. 231.
- 23 William Holtz, "Typography, *Tristram Shandy*, The Aposiopesis, etc.", *The Winged Skull : Papers from the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference*, London, Methuen, p. 251.
- 24 Fictional past and fictional present.
- 25 *T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 20, 41.
- 26 Howard Anderson says that "(...) it is quickly established that Tristram has set out to educate and train our imaginations rather than allow us the simpler pleasures of giving free rein to our own conceptions or passively relying on his." Howard Anderson, "*Tristram Shandy* and ...", *op. cit.* , p. 612.
- 27 *T.S.*, vol.1, ch. 1.
- 28 Here it seems important to quote Tristram on the question of the reader's participation : "The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself" (*T.S.*, vol. 2, ch. 11, 77).
- 29 The narrator is no doubt a wizard with words.
- 30 See note 3, *T.S.*, vol. 1, ch. 21, 46.

- 31 Helen Ostovich asserts in this regard that "[t]he writer's role in this creative partnership is [generally] to unburden himself; the reader's is to take up the burden of a vast quantity of apparently unsequenced and inconsequential detail, and simultaneously to attempt to find in it emotional, if not rational coherence." Helen Ostovich, "Reader as hobby-horse...", *op. cit.* , p. 155.
- 32 Speaking of the reader, Henri Fluchère says : "Il n'est pas un être passif et lointain, accoué à une table dans le futur, mais un interlocuteur dans le présent et presque un personnage du roman." Henri Fluchère, *Laurence Sterne : De l'homme...*, *op. cit.* , p. 355.
- 33 We have already seen the importance Sterne confers to the exploration of all possible means of representation.
- 34 Patricia Meyer Spacks writes in this regard that : "[*Tristram Shandy*] is a novel of education in which the hero, incapable of change himself, succeeds in altering the perception and knowledge of the reader who encounters him". Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self : Autobiography and...*, *op. cit.* , p. 136.