



BEYOND THE TEXT: AN INTERTEXTUAL APPROACH TO *TRISTRAM SHANDY*

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Abstract:

Since its first appearance in 1760, Laurence Sterne's comic masterpiece, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, has elicited lively reactions and diverse critical responses, mainly provoked by its surprising capacity to 'borrow' from other texts. The purpose of this paper is to explore the genesis and the intrinsic nature of this complex phenomenon, in an attempt to show that the intertextual dimension of Sterne's novel, far from being a mere additional feature, should be regarded as the constitutive principle of the work and its fundamental *raison d'être*. Put another way, *Tristram Shandy* is conceived and proposed as a literary conversation made up of many voices, which implies that the reader must be able to recognize and properly interpret intertextual references, going beyond the limits of the story being told. From this perspective, one could say that Laurence Sterne's intertextual mode of writing is aimed at educating the reader, inasmuch as the narrator invites the reader to enter into a dialogical relationship with other texts. Furthermore, it will be shown how the famous 'marbled page', considered by the author to be the enigmatic key and emblem of his work, symbolically evokes the intertextual design underlying *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*.

Keywords: Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, Intertextuality, Plagiarism, Education of the Reader

1. Introduction

The theoretical concept of intertextuality, originally explicated by Julia Kristeva in the 1960's, refers to the interconnection between texts, especially works of literature, 'borrowing from one another' in many senses. Intertextual references are used to add layers of meaning to a text, implying the readers' prior knowledge and understanding. More fundamentally, intertextuality accounts for the unavoidable process through which a literary work comes out of isolation and presents itself as part of a wider dialogical context, developed over time in response to other texts. While the concept of intertextuality has been expounded within

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the theoretical framework of post-modernism, the literary device itself has been practised since time immemorial.

If generally intertextuality can be defined as the literal and effective presence of one text in another, achieved by means of allusion, quotation, plagiarism, *pastiche* and parody, Laurence Sterne's comic masterpiece, *Tristram Shandy*, published between 1759 and 1767, should be considered as a case in point.

The first two volumes of the novel were published in York in December 1759. The title page is dated 1760 and there is no indication of where it was published: a strategy to hide the provincial origins of the work, written by a country vicar, Laurence Sterne, until then unknown. It was an immediate success, widely acclaimed for its extraordinary originality (Ross, 2009). At the same time, since its first appearance, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* has been appreciated for its surprising capacity to create interrelationships with a plurality of other texts and literary works. On the one hand, Laurence Sterne's novel looks back to the erudition of Robert Burton, the exuberance of Rabelais, the parodistic tone of Cervantes; on the other it is a formal experiment without precedent, and never to be equalled.

2. A Problem of Textual Identity

"Oh rare Tristram Shandy! ... what shall we call thee? – Rabelais, Cervantes, What?" (Howes, ed., 1974: 52). This brief comment is the eloquent testimonial of one of the first enthusiastic reviews of *Tristram Shandy*, which appeared in *The London Magazine* in February 1760, shortly after the publication of the first two volumes of Sterne's novel. The anonymous reviewer effectively transmits the intense feelings of pleasure and surprise aroused by reading *Tristram Shandy*. This unexpected pleasure consists, for the educated reader, in the process of rediscovering great and favourite authors, implied in the text as inspiring literary models, who come to life again in the familiar form, exquisitely British, of the mid-eighteenth-century comic novel.

The intertextual dimension plays a crucial role in Laurence Sterne's masterpiece, to the point of implying a problem of textual identity concerning the definition of the work and its author: "What shall we call thee?" This should not be considered merely as a rhetorical question; in fact, it is a question capable of disclosing a wide range of names, besides those explicitly mentioned in the text, such as Rabelais and Cervantes. It is a vast repertory embracing the whole circle of letters, and depending entirely on the reader's literary knowledge and his capacity to trace the digressive paths interwoven with Tristram's inexhaustible conversation.

It is not without significance, moreover, that the intertextual approach to Sterne's masterpiece has been practised by literary criticism right from the beginning, as Melvyn New authoritatively claims. It is by no means a coincidence that the editors of the prestigious *Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne*, in the third volume of the series, consider the intertextual dimension of the highest relevance for an in-depth understanding and appreciation of such a complex novel (New, Davies and Day, 1984: 12-24)

3. *Tristram Shandy* between Plagiarism and Geniality

It is well known that Laurence Sterne has always had an extremely free, idiosyncratic relationship with his sources, which appears to be neither conform to the minimum criteria for quoting, nor consistent in itself. Thus, the pervasive presence of Montaigne is often indicated, but several additional borrowings from the same author have been uncovered by contemporary critics (Wehrs, 1988). The names of the two favourite writers already mentioned are emphasized (“My dear Rabelais, and dearer Cervantes”), whereas Robert Burton’s work, very soon identified as one of the main sources of *Tristram Shandy*, remains in fact concealed from the reader. Again, going back to more recent writers, the debt towards Jonathan Swift is easily recognizable due to the explicit mention of *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), indispensable satirical model for *Tristram Shandy* (Parnell, 1994). On the other hand, it is surprising that there is no mention of the most famous novelists of the Eighteenth century, from Daniel Defoe to Samuel Richardson to Henry Fielding, despite the fact that Sterne’s narrative bears testimony to a thorough reading of at least *Tom Jones* (Ross, 2002; Keymer, 2006; Folkenflik, 2009).

The most quoted writer in *Tristram Shandy* is undoubtedly John Locke, whose name recurs seven times throughout the novel. In particular, the philosopher’s major work is explicitly mentioned in a famous passage, in which the narrator teases the reader by questioning the real nature of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*:

“Pray, Sir, in all the reading which you have ever read, did you ever read such a book as Locke’s *Essay upon the Human Understanding*? — Don’t answer me rashly, -- because many, I know, quote the book, who have not read it, --- and many have read it who understand it not:--- If either of these is your case, as I write to instruct, I will tell you in three words what the book is. — It is a history. — A history! of who? what? where? when? Don’t hurry yourself. — It is a history-book, Sir, (which may possibly recommend it to the world) of what passes in a man’s own mind; and if you will say so much of the book, and no more, believe me, you will cut no contemptible figure in a metaphysic circle.”

(*Tristram Shandy*, II, II, p. 70)ⁱⁱ

What is more, in *Tristram Shandy* we find also a totally unexpected mention of the third book of Locke’s philosophical treatise, “Of Words”, entirely devoted to elucidating the problematic aspects of language and communication, and therefore destined to have profound and lasting effects on eighteenth-century literature (*Tristram Shandy*, V, VII, p. 288). It should be clear, at this point, why Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* has represented the most challenging intertextual problem on which critics and literary scholars have concentrated their attention for more than two centuries (Anstey, 2009). Regarding Sterne’s relationship with the most eminent philosophers of his time, David Hume and

ⁱⁱ The quotations from *Tristram Shandy* will be cited by volume, chapter, and page with reference to Sterne (2009 a).

Adam Smith, some probable influences on *Tristram Shandy* may be noticed by the attentive reader, notwithstanding the fact that in the novel there are no references either to the names or works of these famous contemporaries of Sterne (Lupton, 2003; MacLean, 1949; Prince, 1996).

Since the publication of the first two volumes of Sterne's novel, in December 1759, the greatest difficulty for literary critics has been the arbitrary and inconsistent way in which the author relates to his sources, as shown by the early critical responses to *Tristram Shandy*. It was only at the end of the century, with the publication of the *Illustrations of Sterne* (1798), that John Ferriar denounced Sterne's indiscriminate use of entire passages and tacit borrowings from various authors, pointing out especially the frequent recourse to Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. And yet, as we have already remarked, neither the name nor the work of this seventeen-century writer is mentioned throughout the nine volumes of Laurence Sterne's idiosyncratic narrative. The issue as to whether or not this should be considered plagiarism has been the subject of lively discussions for many years (Terry, 2010). But at the same time, an undisputed originality has always been acknowledged as the peculiar and undeniable merit of the creator of *Tristram Shandy*. In this respect, it is significant to quote a paradoxical but profoundly true judgment, formulated by Walter Scott in 1825, where Sterne is defined "one of the greatest plagiarists, and one of the most original geniuses whom England has produced" (Scott, 1825: 205).

4. The Encyclopedic Plan of the Work

The problematic intertextual complexity of Sterne's work makes it necessary to identify some orientative criteria. To this end, it might be helpful to take as a starting point a famous letter, sent by Sterne to the London publisher Robert Dodsley, dated 23 May 1759. The letter, written to accompany the manuscript of the first volume of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, contains a synthetic presentation of the general plan of the work:

"The plan, as you will perceive, is a most extensive one, — taking in, not only the weak part of the sciences, in which the true point of ridicule lies — but everything else, which I find laughable in my way."

(Sterne, 2009b: vol. I, 80)

The relevance of this concise description is evident, inasmuch as the author, announcing the birth of *Tristram Shandy*, summarizes the sense and importance of the overall design. The sense lies in the *ridicule*, a key concept that the eighteenth-century philosophical and literary reflection had already explored and theorized with authors such as Shaftesbury (1999) and Fielding. Significantly enough, "the true point of ridicule" is to be found in "the weak part of the sciences", where the word *sciences* should be taken in the widest meaning of the term as a synonym for "human knowledge", according to Melvyn New (Sterne, 2009b: vol. I, note 3, 81-82).

The encyclopedic nature of Sterne's novel is thus outlined right from the beginning, not as an additional characteristic but as the generative principle of the work and its

fundamental *raison d'être*. The main target of Sterne's satire is to be found in the excessive pretences of knowledge, in the abuses of the so-called scientific culture, which risk to undermine the validity of evidence and common sense, thus compromising an adequate understanding of human existence (New, 1969). This is the weak side of scientific knowledge: "weak" because, in the last analysis, it fails in the pursuit of happiness and life satisfaction that seemed to be the necessary consequence of the Enlightenment myth of progress (Hawley, 2009). It is from this perspective that the reader can appreciate, in the first volume of *Tristram Shandy*, the humorous enumeration of the most improbable branches of science:

"Thus, --- thus my fellow labourers and associates in this great harvest of our learning, now ripening before our eyes: thus it is, by slow steps of casual increase, that our knowledge physical, metaphysical, physiological, polemical, nautical, mathematical, ænigmatical, technical, biographical, romantical, chemical, and obstetrical, with fifty other branches of it, (most of 'em ending, as these do, in *ical*) have, for these two last centuries and more, gradually been creeping upwards towards that *Ακμή* of their perfections, from which, if we may form a conjecture from the advances of these last seven years, we cannot possibly be far off."

(Tristram Shandy, I, XXI, p. 52)

It is worth noting that the eccentric list of different branches of knowledge ends with the mention of obstetrics. In *Tristram's* story, this appears to be the most wanted and vital knowledge, which will be dramatically lacking at the decisive moment of the protagonist's birth, as narrated in the third volume of the novel. More generally speaking, in the passage quoted above the author offers a comprehensive vision of the encyclopedic ambition, so widely spread among his contemporaries, with the aim of parodying its excesses. Ironically enough, however, the narrator himself is actively involved "in this great harvest of our learning", in which he participates through the writing of his *Life and Opinions*, expressly undertaken "for the edification of the world", as *Tristram* never tires of repeating (*Tristram Shandy, I, XVIII, p. 39*). Not incidentally, the first intertextual relationship that appears in Sterne's novel moves precisely in this direction: still at the beginning of his writing process, *Tristram* undermines his own self-praise by subtle self-mockery, while proclaiming that his "life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and [...] will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever, — be no less read than the *Pilgrim's Progress* itself" (*Tristram Shandy, I, IV, p. 7*).

5. Intertextuality and the Education of the Reader

If, on the one hand, it is evident that no text can exist without borrowing from what has been written in the past – in other words, no work can claim to be absolutely original – in the case of *Tristram Shandy* this assumption becomes the inherent significance of the book, its *raison d'être* as a 'literary text'. To put the problem from a slightly different point of view, one could say that Laurence Sterne's intertextual mode of writing is aimed at educating the

reader, inasmuch as the narrator invites the reader to enter into a dialogical relationship with other texts. Right from the beginning, *Tristram Shandy* is proposed as a literary conversation made up of many voices, which implies that the reader must be able to recognize and properly interpret intertextual references, going beyond the limits of the story being told (New, 1994).

In one of the first chapters of the novel, Tristram outlines the ideal path that will guide the progressive journey of his relationship with the reader (*Tristram Shandy*, I, VI, p. 10). It is a sort of propaedeutic preparation for reading the novel, in which the narrator and protagonist introduces himself by telling the reader about his particular way of narrating his story. Let us quote the concluding passage of the mentioned chapter:

“Therefore, my dear friend and companion, if you should think me somewhat sparing of my narrative on my first setting out, — bear with me, — and let me go on, and tell my story my own way: — or 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 anything, — only keep your temper.”
(*Tristram Shandy*, I, VI, pp. 10-11; *my emphasis*)

The crucial point in the passage quoted above coincides with the moment when Tristram mentions the jester’s cap: “[if I] should sometimes put on a fool’s cap with a bell to it”. Here an important intertextual dimension comes into play through the programmatic ambiguity of the narrator, who ostentatiously takes on the mask of the fool, claiming to have wisdom in spite of his external appearance (“*give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside*”).

Thus, through the image of the jester’s cap, the author brings into play a series of motifs, characters, situations codified in written works within a specific literary tradition. Certainly, the most immediate reference is to the Shakespearean *fool*, and in particular to Yorick, jester to the court of Hamlet, king of Denmark. And it is no coincidence that, a few pages further on, the name of Yorick is attributed to a humble and famous character, *alter ego* of the author himself and introduced at the beginning of a new chapter with a particular emphasis: “YORICK was this parson’s name” (*Tristram Shandy* I, XI, p. 20).

As the reader proceeds through Sterne’s narrative, he realizes that the reference to the wisdom of the fool, in the above-mentioned chapter, opens the way for a much wider intertextual dimension. Throughout the story, Tristram will draw on the wise folly of Erasmus, to which he already aspires, in the initial phase of his writing, when he sadly recognizes: “But the truth is,---I am not a wise man” (*Tristram Shandy*, I, VIII, p. 13). Moreover, and most importantly, Tristram’s reader is to be confronted with the madness of Don Quixote, who is introduced into the novel in relation to the figure of Parson Yorick. In addition to all this, one must consider that this vein of innocent and healthy madness is precisely what the author chooses to highlight in each of his characters, playing with the concept of *hobby-horse*, that is, emphasizing a typical mania, a particular obsession to which

the inner world of the subject is anchored. Nor is it irrelevant to observe, in this context, that the playful word ‘hobby-horse’ appears for the first time in chapter VII, deliberately associated with the proverbial wisdom of King Solomon:

“Sir, have not the wisest of men in all ages, not excepting Solomon himself, — have they not had their HOBBY-HORSES; — their running horses, — their coins and their cockle-shells, their drums and their trumpets, their fiddles, their pallets, — their maggots and their butterflies? — and so long as a man rides his HOBBY-HORSE peaceably and quietly along the King’s highway, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him, — pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it?”

(*Tristram Shandy*, I, VII, p. 12)

6. Towards a Conclusion

By exploring the intertextual paths in *Tristram Shandy*, the reader can gradually experience the difference between vain and pretentious erudition on the one hand, and true knowledge on the other. The possibility of extricating oneself from the labyrinth of opinions and interpretations, which are so closely interwoven in Tristram’s writing, depends on the reader’s ability to interpret the intertextual signals, hidden under the apparent confusion of the surface. This is the meaning alluded to in the following exhortation, significantly placed near the end of the third volume, which is the volume where the birth of the hero does finally occur:

“Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read, — [...] for without *much reading*, by which your reverence knows, I mean *much knowledge*, you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motly emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one.”

(*Tristram Shandy*, III, XXXVI, p. 180)

According to the author, this passage intends to illustrate the famous marbled page that constitutes the enigmatic key and emblem of the whole novel. The insistent repetition of the verb “read”, within the context of the volume and of the whole work, certainly suggests the idea of an intensive reading, capable of understanding the multiple layers of meaning. Furthermore, the exhortation addressed to the “unlearned reader”, in whom everyone is called upon to recognize himself, evidently alludes to the intertextual conversation that Sterne’s work implies and develops as its own constitutive dimension. Finally, one might observe that the marbled page, with its brightly coloured, variegated design calls to mind the characteristic jester costume (“motly”), and therefore the wisdom of the *fool*. Yet, at the same time, it evokes the multiple intertextual pathways that appear so closely interwoven in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*.

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