

论斯特恩叙事 艺术的 颠覆与约束

On Laurence Sterne's Artistic
Subversion and Constraint

宋建福 / 著



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Introduction

This book is an enquiry into Laurence Sterne's artistic subversion and constraint as demonstrated in his carnivalesque nine – volume masterpiece *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* When each volume of *Tristram Shandy* was published, it was universally loved and heartily enjoyed for its humor or satire, yet widely hated, obviously due to its artificially created disorder. Three artistic traditions merging into one, Sterne's narrative art had failed to be understood and recognized for almost two centuries in the field of literary criticism. When 20th century reached its middle period, scholarly efforts had successfully unearthed the mysterious charms of Sterne's narrative art, yet there still have even today questions to be answered. To further expose Sterne's artistic intention and logic behind his subversive artistic practice in the disputed novel would probably facilitate the constructive research of *Tristram Shandy*, and pay homage, though a belated one, to the respectable literary magnate.

The critical history of Laurence Sterne's chaotic novel *Tristram Shandy* in the past few centuries consists of peaks and valleys of reputation, and an account of the complex fate the nine – volume novel has ever endured will surely take the pseudo Shandean feature of a snake – like curve. The enormous warmth and praise that greeted the appearance of the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* waned with the publication of the remaining seven. When sufficient fictional practice in the nineteenth century had brought into maturity the tradition of English novel started by

Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, *Tristram Shandy* was even further marginalized in the literary canon, enjoying a totally black page of critical reputation.^① However, its fate took a turn for the better when modernism appeared on the scene, and as a compensation for the unfair treatment of almost two centuries, postmodernism when superseding modernism in the highlight of literary attention continued the homage modernism paid to *Tristram Shandy*, regarding the novel as a classic, a paradigm and justification of its fictional practice. Today, *Tristram Shandy* has been well established as an artistically successful novel.

Before *Tristram Shandy* was recognized by both modernists and postmodernists as a great literary achievement, its reputation of wit and humor was well balanced by the intermittent protests against its indecency. Oliver Goldsmith remarks that Sterne's figures "lie level to the meanest capacities, and address those passions which all have, or would be ashamed to disown"^②. William Thackeray is even harsher by saying that "The foul satyr's eyes leer out of the leaves constantly; the last words the famous author wrote were bad and wicked—the last lines the poor stricken wretch penned were for pity and pardon"^③. Against these, of course, can be set the genuine enthusiasm that greeted Sterne's early volumes and raised him to such heights of celebrity. Many reviewers praised Sterne for his humor and his efforts in carrying forward the tradition of English wit that could be traced back to Rabelais and Cervantes. The greatest tribute that his contemporaries offered to him was the appearance of such opportunistic volumes as *The Life and Opinions of Miss Suckey Shandy* (1760), *Feremiah Kunastrokus* (1760) and even *Yorick's Meditations* (1760). Continental readers responded to *Tristram Shandy* with the same interest and praise. Detroit was deeply impressed by Sterne's wit and morality and copied episodes from the novel at the opening and close of his own novel *Jacques le Fataliste*. In Germany, Hegel

① Max Byrd, *Tristram Shandy* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1985) 138.

② Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, ed. Howard Anderson (London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1980) 480.

③ Ibid., 493.

praised Sterne's ability to mix tears and laughter and used him as a starting point for his own serious philosophies of humor. It is justified to say that Sterne's wit and humor are the very first things that ever win the readers' sympathy and support.

Sterne's philosophical implications in *Tristram Shandy* began to appeal to the critics with the publication of *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (1954). In this book, John Taugott initiates the study of Sterne's morality and moral teaching in the wildest sense as philosophical. But Traugott celebrates Sterne's dramatization of Locke's rationalism at the cost of denying the novel's fictional status. The most rewarding study in this respect, though, is James Swearingen's *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy* (1977), which treats the book as a phenomenology in the precise sense used by the twentieth century philosopher Edmund Husserl, and which links *Tristram Shandy* to the general question of personal identity. By contrast, Richard A. Lanham believes that Tristram's whole performance is self-indulgent and self-serving, and like all games has as its only objective the production of pleasure. Lanham's sense of sheer mischievous delight in the novel is therefore openly subversive of the philosophical dignity thrust upon by other critics: "It provides a pleasure equation of mutual tolerance for the private life. But it philosophizes little else."^① Here Lanham comes close to the spirit in which Sterne intends his novel to baffle all criticism.

However, it will be a waste of efforts and a betrayal of Sterne's artistic talents to hold *Tristram Shandy* merely as a comic or philosophical work. Nevertheless, *Tristram Shandy's* artistic value, especially the mystifying structure, was not to be appreciated until the rise of modernism and postmodernism, and it was not fully explored until the 1960s. Goldsmith wryly reduces the book to "nine hundred and ninety-five breaks, seventy-two ha ha's, three good things, and a caster". The view that the novel seems to be written without any plan does not die with the eighteenth century. The dominant reaction of the nineteenth century is epitomized in Walter

① Richard A. Lanham, *Tristram Shandy: The Games of Pleasure* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 166.

Bagehot's scorn for the "fantastic disorder of the form", for its lack of plan or order which rendered it "in every generation unfit for analysis". The same judgment, in more tolerant form, persists into the early twentieth century. As E. M. Forster pointed out, "Obviously a god is hidden in *Tristram Shandy*, his name is Muddle, and some readers cannot accept him... Dr Johnson, writing in 1776, should remark: 'Nothing odd will do long. *Tristram Shandy* did not last.'"^①

The perseverance of this attitude has not prevented the criticism of *Tristram Shandy* from a gradual awakening to the method in Sterne's apparent madness or chaos. Critics have finally come to the realization that something instead of suitable vagary holds the novel together and makes it work. William Pepps, one of the first to discern traces of order in the novel, comments that though it is "a strange eccentric composition", yet "it could be tried by rules adapted to the subject, and a judgment pronounced upon its merits". Pepps's acute observation in 1776 led sympathetic critics to a commitment to that tremendous task of discovering just what rule should be adapted to this very puzzling subject. Progress was slow but steady. William Enfield believes that "Sterne's originality did not consist in a want of method", the true Shandean manner is a "conversational style without its defects". Then Coleridge considers the pervasive presence of its dramatically contrasted characters the cohesion of the novel. Viktor Shklovsky maintains that Sterne deliberately works to make his readers aware of the artificial nature of novelistic form, its impersonal conventions of ordinary fiction, by means of disrupting consecutiveness and mocking plot, character development and time scheme, so as to bring to the surface and explode before our eyes the devices that underlie every fiction. When James Work champions Locke's doctrine of the association of ideas as the cohesive principle, John Traugott holds that *Tristram Shandy* is not an embodiment of Locke's associationism but a parody of it, and that the whole is held together by a relentless burlesque of rhetorical techniques that discloses a history of the mind. Wayne Booth improved on Traugott's idea

① E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1987) 106.

of rhetoric as an organizing element by pointing out that the principle of formal order in the novel is the mind of its narrator,^① an idea that is now universally acknowledged. This means the shifting of emphasis from external to the internal event, from the patterned plot artificially conceived and imposed on the characters, to the free evocation of the fluid, ever changing process of being.

Systematic studies of the narrative skills in *Tristram Shandy* was initiated in the 1960s by James E. Swearingen and William Freedman, and furthered by Hans C. Werner in 1999. Swearingen's contribution is not limited to the philosophical analysis of the novel, as is shown above. He has persuasively argued into the bargain that the structure of *Tristram Shandy*'s consciousness is intentionality, which helps organize the motley of anecdotes, stories and the narrator's comments. Swearingen's intentionality refers to "the selective and directional thrust of one's interest or hobby – horsical thinking", which may take the dimension of either rationality or irrationality.^② It is therefore remarkably differentiated from Aristotelian mechanics of association in that the Aristotelian devices of similarity, contrast and contiguity are subjugated to the narrator's will, which does not necessarily conform to the normality. Swearingen's analysis of the structure of *Tristram*'s consciousness is instrumental to the comprehension of the narrative structure of the novel.

Freedman takes a quite different path from Swearingen's in the analysis of the unity principle of *Tristram Shandy* by accepting musicality as the very element that orchestrates the multiple minor narrations of the novel. According to Freedman, music speaks by means of mere sensations without concepts; therefore, it can be regarded as a new magical language of the feelings or one's inner thoughts. It is not so much concerned with clock time as with the psychological time—the sense of time as all pervading present that includes past and future rather than as an orderly procession of separate events. Music also distinguishes itself with its autonomy. It is not

① Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 229.

② James E. Swearingen, *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy* (London: Yale University Press, 1977) 62.

primarily an imitation of the external world, but a bound world in itself, a “globed compacted thing”, in Virginia Woolf’s term. The outstanding feature of music is arguably its capacity to reduce the most contradictory movements of our soul to the same beautiful harmonies. With his precise understanding and interpretation of music, Freedman comes to conclude that Sterne/Tristram is the first English novelist that has ever applied the principle of music to the creation of novel. He argues that Tristram’s narration is specially subordinated to the various principles and designs, which generate and shape musical composition: contrapuntal interplay, theme and variation, repetition and recapitulation, modulation, concentricity, and the emphasis is laid upon process and progression, on fluid patterns of temporal simultaneity and flow, the subtle ooze or violent shifts of thoughts and feelings. ①

Hans C. Werner embarks on an ambitious project when he incorporates the theory of entropy into the analysis of the narrative skills of Tristram. The theory of entropy claims that chaos is a complex system consisting of a confusion of order and disorder, so it does not signify only disorder, but order and disorder interacted. Furthermore, chaos is a dynamic system where the old simple order, with the addition of new elements however minor in importance, will give rise to new “chaos”. This new chaos signifies great complexity and abundance of information instead of disorder, and takes time before it comes to be recognized as a new different system. It follows therefore that order is to be found in the midst of chaos, or can even grow out of chaos, and it is safe to observe that it is the varied information that presents a fake impression to the observant that chaos is nothing but disorder. With the help of entropy theory, Werner cuts into *Tristram Shandy* on the basis of the reader’s response theory. He firmly believes that when an individual enters a text with his preconception of the literary work, a process of interaction is initiated in which new information is obtained and the old structure rooted in the reader’s mind reshaped, and each group of readers will have their own typical interpretation of the novel. Just as Hawkins has

① William Freedman, *Laurence Sterne and the Origins of the Musical novel* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1978) 13.

noticed, texts with chaotic patterns can excite and arouse interest after centuries, and evoke chaotic responses, contradictory interpretations and altogether different generic adaptations. ①

Whereas the three scholars have fully committed to the study of the organizing principle of the seemingly chaotic novel, their academic achievements still leave gaps to be bridged and new fields to be further explored. Swearingen has shifted his focus of study in the later part of his monograph to the relationship between language and the world and the significance of Shandean maladies on the level of human civilization. He leaves the narrative paradigm of the novel untouched after he has convincingly explicated intentionality as the organizing factor that functions throughout the novel, even on different scales. Although Freedman has unmistakably worked out on the thematic level the pattern that Tristram follows in manipulating his motifs and the narrative patterns on a subordinate scale, he fails in the same way to elaborate on the nature of the plot. Werner has followed both Swearingen and Freedman to make the list longer. Despite the fact that he is justified to explore the various responses readers might make in the course of reading, he should give at least one interpretation of the narrative structure from the perspective of a definite reading group. What is even more interesting to notice is that all of them do not offer an analysis of the art of Tristram's digression, which makes the most ostensive feature of the novel, let alone the literary effects of the subversive practice. Still another problem that deserves due attention from the critical world is, since it is a unanimous agreement that Tristram's being is in the writing, what is then the relationship between his present engagement and his past, and how does it exert influence on the plot of the novel? Does it carry any further implication? Above all, is there a suitable theory that might provide a plausible perspective to help explain the carnivalesque practice of Tristram Shandy without separating the work from the context at its creation?

To better answer all of the questions listed above, the best policy is to turn to

① Harriet Hawkins, *Strange Attractors: Literature, Culture and Chaos Theory* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1995) 8.

Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization, which has been established as the theoretical framework of this book. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization is undoubtedly the most suitable answer to the last question posed above. First, it is universally recognized that Tristram/Sterne has received much influence from Rabelais in the creation of *Tristram Shandy*. "Oh rare Tristram Shandy!" apostrophized one critic (touching instinctively the question of Tristram's identity), "Thou very sensible—humourous—pathetic—humane—unaccountable! —what shall we call thee? —Rabelais, Cervantes, what?" "The English Rabelais," Bishop Warburton declared pompously to everyone who would listen; "England's second Rabelais," Voltaire corrected, giving precedence to Swift.^① Second, the carnivalesque art of Rabelais's masterpiece of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and Dostoevsky's novels has been one of Bakhtin's chief achievements in his inseminating research of fictional art. More significantly, Bakhtin points out that "A combination of carnivalization with a sentimental perception of life was found by Dostoevsky in Sterne and Dickens".^② All this has justified the application of Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization to the study of Laurence Sterne's carnivalistic art.

Carnivalization is a much broader term than is widely assumed to be. It first indicates the subversion of social convention by the folk during the carnival of the Medieval Period. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin defines carnivalization as "the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything"^③. It is, according to Bakhtin, a "temporary suspension of hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions". The folk subverted, loosened and mocked everything authoritative, rigid or serious so as to enjoy an expression of universal freedom. The reason behind the carnival lies in that

① Alan B. Howes, ed., *The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971) 52, 56, 390.

② Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. & trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 159.

③ Ibid., 129–30.

the official life people lived was “monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence and piety”.

However, carnivalization does not take it as fun to demolish everything. It forms instead a new kind of human relationship that embodies both democracy and equality.

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance.... All were considered equal during carnival.... People were, so to speak, re-born for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. ①

So pattern, as reflected in the “new purely human relations,” is still the dominating element of carnivalization, though quite a differentiated one. If carnival is subversive and chaotic in comparison with the well established social order it has temporarily deconstructed, it suggests undoubtedly a new order in its own right. It is true nihilism that constructs nothing in the course of deconstruction. Furthermore, as every child carries the gene of their father, so everything new emerging out of something old keeps the code of the root. The code might not be visible, yet it remains there right behind the scene, and would like a shadow follow you wherever you go. Therefore, the thing that is absent is never really out of sight or out of power. A few paragraphs below the above quotation, Bakhtin further points out that “Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture”. What carnival revives and renews is certainly a traditional order, and by means of revival and renewal, it sends a clear message to the spectators of carnival that the existing functional order is the background framework against which it establishes its new order, and a grail perhaps left to the readers to trace. It is obvious that carnival carries with it the seriousness in its peculiar logic of “inside out”. Order within/behind disorder and seriousness within playfulness are both fre-

① Mikhail Bakhtin, “Rabelais and His World,” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 45 – 6.

quently neglected yet essential to the understanding of Bakhtin's carnivalization.

Bakhtin's carnivalization is further reflected in his concept of dialogue or dialogism. Bakhtin describes the concept of dialogue in different terms in different works: *carnival* in *Rabelais and His World*; *polyphony* in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *heteroglossia* in "Discourse in the Novel". Each of these terms captures, though each with a different emphasis, the dialogic interrelationship of utterances as a complex unity of differences. The dialogism of carnival lies in that it juxtaposes a new and quite different way of life with the well-established social practices even though for a considerably short period, and shows with conviction that the essence of life is pluralism rather than monism. Polyphony is the distinguishing characteristic of the polyphonic novel. This new kind of novel is no longer a direct expression of the author's truth but an active creation of the truth in the consciousnesses of the author, the characters, and the reader, in which all participate as equals. The author's dialogic position in relation to the characters requires a new creative process, occurring "in the *real present*", as an ongoing activity, not as a stenographer's report of a finished dialogue, from which the author has already withdrawn and over which the author presides as a higher authority. The characters participate in this ongoing dialogue not as objects of the author's consciousness but as "*free people, capable of standing alongside*", agreeing or disagreeing with, even rebelling against, their creator. In the polyphonic novel, the reader, too, must participate in the dialogue since the dialogic interaction provides no support either thematically or cognitively for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category, and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant. The concept of polyphony has obviously been a chief challenge to the absolute status of monologue of the privileged group.

Heteroglossia, as another varied form of dialogue thus of carnivalization, is described as a complex mixture of meanings or views of the world within the same utterance (double-voiced) as a result of constant use and semantic accumulation. The speaker lives in a world in which the word exists in three guises: as the

neutral word of language which belongs to no one, as the word of the other belonging to others, and as a word of the self that the self has appropriated—forced to become its own word—by means of the capture of a foreign word. But the word in the process of communication is never a neutral word of language, empty of intentions and uninhabited by the voice of the other. Beginning at infancy, the speaker receives from the mother the word of the other that is filled with the intonations—the emotional or volitional affirmations of others. As Bakhtin points out,

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in neutral and impersonal language..., but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and makes it one's own. ①

As the meanings of the word accumulate, there emerges a centrifugal force that regulates the relationships between the meanings. The centrifugal force tends to push things away from a central point and out in all directions so as to move language toward multiplicity. The multiplicity of meaning is certainly achieved not by disconnecting the signifier and the signified, but by including a wide variety of different ways of speaking, different rhetorical strategies and vocabularies. Therefore, heteroglossia denies the centripetal force that subjects differences to one unified form, recognizing and facilitating a dialogue or negotiation between differences. It reflects the true spirit of carnivalization in defying the absolute power and negotiating for itself a right of existence.

The essence of carnivalization is therefore to uncover, undermine the hegemony of any ideology that seeks to have the final word about the world. With dialogism, a fundamental aspect of the carnival, carnivalization advocates a plurality of valid con-

① Mikhail Bakhtin, "Rabelais and His World", *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 35.

sciousnesses, each bringing with them a different point of view, a different way of seeing the world. Two voices are the minimum for life, the minimum for existence. If dialogism ends, everything ends. Through dialogue, carnivalization opens new possibilities for each culture, reveals hidden potentials. Thus Bakhtin's carnival theory is not reducible to terms such as anarchic, nor irresponsible. It is, in fact, a diverse tactic, one that may be implemented and sustained wherever there is a dominant regime.

However, the twenty first century literary students are surely quick to notice abundant similarities between Bakhtin's Carnivalization on the one hand, and Russian formalist foregrounding, structuralism, modernism and postmodernism on the other, and this book has no intention to argue against these similarities. In fact, this book does not hesitate to borrow some points from formalist, structuralist and postmodernist concepts of fictional art to support the artistic carnivalization of *Tristram Shandy*. Such practice is not so much an indication that carnivalization is an all-inclusive term as an understanding that artistic carnivalization aims to identify the spirit instead of a set of rules revealed through the analysis of Rabelais's and Dostoevsky's works. Nevertheless, some differences between the five concepts are tentatively expounded herein. While formalist foregrounding celebrates the breaking down of banal artistic conventionality, it takes artistic beauty as its ultimate pursuit, thus undeniably serious in nature. That is exactly what *Tristram* aims to bring down, though. Gravity is never to be found clearly defined in *Tristram's* dictionary: it is always camouflaged with the loud color of playfulness. In spite of the paradigms disclosed through detailed analysis, structuralism will find his art less representative. New criticism will appreciate its paradoxes, but criticize it for its lack of tensions. Modernism rejoices in doing away with plot and time, yet it does not want to play. Although postmodernism carries much philosophical implication in terms of subversiveness, carnivalization embodies the emancipation and celebration of humanity, for as Bakhtin points out, "People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations" through the activity. *Tristram's* writing his biography is actually a way of self-reflexivity, to un-