Chapter 2
The Defence of Wit: Sterne, Locke and the Particular*

> I write a careless kind of a civil, nonsensical, good-humoured Shandean book, which will do all your hearts good——
> – And all your heads too, – provided you understand it.
>
> Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, VI.xvii

> Les situations prêtent moins à confusion que les mots.
>
> Henri Fluchère, *Laurence Sterne*

I

How one reads Sterne can depend on how one construes his attitude to the great Locke, by turns Sterne's hero and his butt. According to one widely accepted account, which derives from a number of sources, including John Traugott's *Tristram Shandy's World* and to some extent also Henri Fluchère's *Laurence Sterne*, Sterne and Locke found common cause chiefly in distrust of the speculative intellect: 'both Sterne and Locke found primary energy in reflection on learned trumpery and its utter success in the world.'[1]

From this point of agreement, however, their paths divide. What Locke pits against idle learning is Newtonian science. In the service of that kind of clarity and objectivity he defends on the one hand a 'plain historic method' which tests the validity of every concept by asking whether its content can be explained in terms of sensory experience and, on the other hand, an ideal of plain speaking and

* An earlier version of this paper saw the light at a meeting of the Renaissance Seminar at the University of Sussex in April 1987. The present version has profited from the discussion at that meeting.

writing founded upon accurate definition and the avoidance of metaphor and all other literary devices calculated more to decorate and charm than to clarify and instruct. Sterne, so it is said, disliked the rather arid rationalism of Locke's scientifically disinfected plain language, and set out to show that it would not work as a medium of communication. According to Traugott, Sterne's characters 'are so made that, operating on Locke's premisses, they completely foil his rational method for communication'. Fluchère goes further, and speaks of the *faillité de la logique et des arts du langage* which manifests itself in the dialogue of the deaf which prevails between My Father and uncle Toby on any rational or intellectual level.[2]

One line of Sterne criticism, pioneered by the Russian formalist Shklovskii, develops this way of taking Sterne's intentions towards Locke into the familiar view of Sterne as a precursor of the formalist strand in Modernism, and the man who deconstructed the conventions of the Realist novel before they had properly become established. I want to concentrate here, though, on another, indigenous, line of criticism which pursues the relationship with Locke a little further.

Locke's philosophy of language was a variant of what literary critics have recently learned to call *logocentrism*. Locke believed, that is, that the meaning of a word was a mental state – an 'idea' – in the mind, or better, the consciousness of a speaker; and that language is only necessary because we cannot inspect the ideas in one another's minds. Being thus metaphysically isolated from one another, so Locke's story goes, we are forced to communicate by means of verbal tokens, each of which stands for a determinate idea or complex of ideas. A speaker, in effect, encodes his ideas into a string of words and transmits them to a hearer, who decodes the string by calling up in his own mind the simple or complex idea associated with each of its component words.

Locke, because of his logocentrism, was haunted by the thought that, since there can be no *direct* inspection of the contents of one mind by another, communication between minds would be metaphysically impossible if it did not proceed by means of verbal tokens in the manner he outlines. Sterne critics have proceeded to draw the inference – a very rash one, in my estimation – that Sterne was haunted by the same thought. They have not, on the whole, considered the possibility that Sterne might have broken with Locke's logocentrism; rejecting with good reason both Locke's Cartesian conception of the mind as a non-physical realm without essential dependence upon the body, and his doctrine that words acquire meaning by coming to stand by association as tokens for events or

states in that realm, and thus freeing himself not merely from the detail of Locke's theory of language, but also from the metaphysical dilemma which motivated it; despite the fact that there is, as we shall see, plenty of textual evidence that Sterne rejected both that conception and that doctrine. Here, for instance, is J. B. Priestley drawing the fatal inference:

> A satirist, loathing his species, could have taken such tragicomical little creatures, each in the separate mechanical box of his mind, and made out of them a scene or narrative that would have jangled the nerves of a dozen generations. Sterne, however . . . preserves the balance by emphasizing what we might call the kinship of his people. If the Shandies cannot share one another's thoughts, they can share one another's feelings. . . .[3]

Notice how smoothly Priestley manœuvres Sterne from the stance of one who really believes that the human predicament includes the tragic isolation of one Cartesian consciousness from another, into the stance of a sentimentalist intellectually credulous enough to imagine that the sharing of 'feelings' could possibly get us out of that predicament, if we were in it. The dangers to Sterne's reputation of this way of reading him have been ably drawn out by A. D. Nuttall. Nuttall accepts the thesis that Sterne's characters illustrate the Cartesian isolation of one mind from another:

> *Tristram Shandy* stands as a marvellously rich and detailed embodiment of the Cartesian view – mediated by Locke – that the mind is a mysterious, fugitive, invisible substance, interpenetrating and acting upon the extended world of matter. . . . We receive a vivid sense of the imprisoned souls of the Shandys, eccentric ghosts, fluttering inside mechanically determined machines.[4]

His way of developing this thesis is, however, destructive of Sterne's claim to be regarded as a proto-Modernist, turning him instead into a boringly representative embodiment of all that was most reactionary and glibly anti-intellectual in his age. Where Shklovskii and others see in Sterne a Modernist sense that the book is an artificial construct, a play of rhetoric and convention, Nuttall sees in Sterne's determination to keep his writing on the rhetorical surface of things a simple reflection of an age whose ultimate wisdom and most representative voice was Hume's. In Hume the medieval and Renaissance vision of the world as a rationally intelligible order gives way to one couched in terms of what Nuttall aptly calls 'chaotic determinism'. Chaotic determinism sees the world as a wilderness of natural accidence, beneath the phenomenal surface of which Reason has no power to penetrate, and which is hence susceptible only of that

minute, vapidly unsatisfying style of description of what is immediately given to experience which Hume recommends on philosophical grounds as constituting the ultimate ground and limit of possible knowledge; but which only Sterne among the major writers of his day transformed into a literary device. What Traugott sees as a Lockeian dislike of 'learned trumpery', Nuttall thus sees as a pessimistic conviction of the impotence of reason to compose our differences or improve an essentially chaotic human condition.

> It is no accident that the writer who first mapped the farcical universe of interlocking trivia should also be the prophet of intellectual abdication. . . . Sterne has merely achieved a vague echo of that more incisive irony of Hume's whereby the completed principles of empiricism were to quell the ambitions of empirical science.

Nuttall's Sterne is a pessimist also about morality. Like Priestley, Nuttall takes it that Sterne's answer to pessimism about the possibility of communication on the level of thought and rational discourse *has to be* optimism about the possibility of communication on the level of feeling:

> The lamp of reason is virtually extinguished, but the sub-rational faculties of feeling, humour, social intuition and affection irradiate the world from below. What heart so chilled with scepticism that it cannot be warmed with contemplation of the good Toby? No book which so successfully combats intellectual despair with a faith in human charity should be described as pessimistic. So runs the argument.

Nuttall argues persuasively that this 'argument' is a very bad one. How much has 'feeling' of the sort purveyed by Priestley's Sterne to do with morality anyway?

> Perhaps it is because charity means more than a warm heart that we sense a breath of nihilism behind even the most affectionate exchanges of the brothers Shandy. We may even begin to suspect that real morality, so far from being preserved by the power of sentiment, has rather been discarded together with the competent intellect. Uncle Toby is a dear good soul, but it would be rash to call him a saint. Is this as high as human nature will reach? It is curious that before the eighteenth century the good characters in literature tend to unite an intelligent perceptiveness with a keen moral sensibility. Lear's moral regeneration on the heath involves an opening of the eyes. After the close of the seventeenth century, however, the road divides. One way leads to the warm-hearted, lovable innocent, the other to the moral vigilante – naturally, for it was

in this century that subjective feeling was firmly divorced from cognitive sensation.[5]

Sterne, Hume's literary double in his antipathy to reason, is in morals also a pale shadow of the Hume for whom the sphere of knowledge includes only matters of fact and relations of ideas, and who considered that in morals, 'Reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions.'

Everything about Nuttall's argument except its conclusion seems to me admirable. Of particular importance, it appears to me, is his insistence that any account of moral goodness worth taking seriously must in some way unite moral sensibility with something in the nature of knowledge. I would go further, indeed, and question whether a 'sensibility', however 'keen', which is not in any way disciplined by 'intelligent perceptiveness' can really be described as *moral* sensibility at all. Even here, however, a doubt creeps in. The thought that there is a gulf between maudlin sentiment and anything one would want to describe as moral sensibility is not a particularly obscure or difficult one, and it is not easy to believe that it never occurred to Sterne. So it comes as no surprise to come upon the following, in the peroration to Yorick's sermon on conscience:

> —No, God and reason made the law, and have placed conscience within you to determine;—not like an Asiatic Cadi, according to the ebbs and flows of his own passions,—but like a British judge in this land of liberty and good sense, who makes no new law, but faithfully declares that law which he knows already written. (II.xvii.155)[6]

It is not easy, though, to discern in this staunchly morally objectivist and rationalist, and I think wholly unironic, passage the siren-voiced sceptic of Nuttall's indictment, beckoning us seductively up the garden path trodden by the Man of Feeling towards the heaven of the Asiatic Cadi by way of a Humean divorce between reason and the passions, feeling and cognition. In fact Nuttall's conclusions seem to me to embody a profoundly misled and misleading view of Sterne. The fault lies not in his argument but in its premisses. He takes for granted the view of Sterne's intentions towards Locke shared by Priestley and many academic critics, and shows very persuasively that that view offers us a Sterne who is in essence a Humean pessimist about both reason and morality. The trouble is that the reading Nuttall takes over from Priestley, Traugott and others is wildly, though not simply, mistaken.

The simplicity of the canonical reading is, indeed, its strength. Sterne did agree with Locke in disliking the pretensions of learning.

He did, also, disagree with Locke's theories about language and the nature of communication. The trouble is only that there is so much *else* in Sterne's text. *Tristram Shandy* is thickly strewn with references to and jokes about Locke. They have become erudite in the century and a half since Locke's *Essay* became a book to be studied but not read; but many of them have been picked up individually by recent critics. What is not so easy, however, is to grasp how they fit together into a coherent response to Locke. My object in this essay is to trace some of the connections between them; and in so doing to reopen our eyes to the Sterne whose comedy is a vehicle of systematic deconstructive resistance to the philosophical dogma of his age. Reading Sterne with an eye to the full range of his response to Locke allows us, I shall argue, to place him in his century without making him merely its representative; and allows him to address some of the preoccupations of Modernism without getting cast as its precursor or patron saint. The Sterne who emerges from such a reading is one who is sceptical about Locke's theory of communication but not at all sceptical about the possibility of communication *per se*; who, far from being a Cartesian dualist, believes that mind and body are necessary 'co-sharers' in human individuality; whose whole thesis about morality is that the good man combines sensibility with an accurate perception of others: in short, a Sterne who, far from being one of the architects of the Eliotean dissociation of sensibility, is fighting a rearguard action against it from which we can still learn something.

Hume, I am afraid, is a red herring here, for two reasons. Nuttall rightly dismisses the first: that although the *Treatise* appeared twenty years before *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne is unlikely to have been familiar with it. Hume was famous in England in the 1750s not as a metaphysician but as an historian. While this suggests that any relation between Sterne and Hume could not have been one of influence, however, it of course leaves parallel responses to related issues as a possibility. The second reason is the important one. It is that Hume's achievement as a metaphysician consists in having drawn out to their logical conclusions just those aspects of Locke's philosophy which Sterne, as we shall see, found suspect.

The Sterne I hope to bring into focus in this essay can sometimes be encountered lurking, a shadowy figure, in the margins of more canonical accounts of his work. Thus Nuttall notes that

> There is a sort of embryonic Wittgenstein inside Sterne, who constantly emphasizes those situations in which language is not a separable picture of the world, but rather a special mode of acting, or doing within the

world. That this should happen anywhere in the eighteenth century is astounding.[7]

This embryonic Wittgenstein, like the embryonic existential phenomenologist sketched by James A. Swearingen,[8] is none other than the actual, adult Laurence Sterne who did not, in fact, faithfully mirror the logocentrism of his age, but, in a manner of speaking, deconstructed it. Traces of him abound in Fluchère. But these hints and intimations need articulating and bringing together into a coherent account of the novel, if they are to stand any chance of displacing the canonical account. To this task I now turn.

II

Sterne's obsession with Locke included both dissent and admiration. Why the latter? What was it that Sterne found liberating in Locke's philosophy? One obvious though unexplored answer is: its nominalism. Locke is a nominalist both in his ontology and in his theory of knowledge. On the first count he holds that 'All things that exist . . . [are] . . . particulars' (*Essay*, III.iii.1), and that 'General and universal are creatures of the understanding' (*Essay*, III.iii.11). On the second count he held that all knowledge 'concerning the existence of anything answerable to an idea' (knowledge of whether anything that exists corresponds, for instance, to such ideas as those of 'an elephant, phoenix, motion or an angel, in my mind . . .') is knowledge 'only of particulars' (*Essay*, IV.xi.13). Claims as abstract and metaphysical as these might appear to have little bearing upon the mundane concerns of the novelist. But just because of the dominating generality of such a view its implications tend to ramify, becoming more specific as they do so. And because such a view concerns what we are to regard as ultimately real, its implications, as they proliferate, partition the areas into which they ramify between the putatively real and the putatively unreal, imposing a systematic 'vision' of how things stand in the world; in this case a nominalist one. Thus the distinction between particular and universal which defines metaphysical nominalism easily gives rise to further distinctions of a generally, though not metaphysically, nominalist stamp; such as those which define the essentially nominalist stance of political individualism, with its claim that it makes no sense to speak, say, of the Church, or the Aristocracy, or the Royal College of Surgeons as really existing entities, since they are at best conceptual fictions, 'creatures', to use Locke's phrase, 'of the understanding', ways in which the mind groups together for its own convenience the

things which *really* exist, that is to say, particular human individuals.

Sterne nowhere pays explicit reverence to Locke's metaphysical nominalism. But it is at the heart of Locke's philosophical position, and the whole tenor of *Tristram Shandy* is in sympathy with the vision which it dominates. For Sterne, the things which truly exist in the human realm are not institutions or organizations (or ideas or theories) but particular human individuals, and whatever abstracts from their unshakeable and ultimate reality is the coinage of the mind. Christopher Ricks, accepting the canonical view that *Tristram Shandy* is haunted by the spectre of metaphysical privacy, turns that into a virtue by construing the novel as enforcing a sense of humility before the unknowable inwardness of another person: the obverse of Guildenstern's attitude to Hamlet.[9] While I think Ricks is right to take the book as a serious call to an essentially Christian humility towards one another, it seems to me that what this humility is supposed to be exercised about is not the unknowable inwardness of another person, but rather her or his concrete particularity, as that is made visible from the outside by his or her words and deeds. There is a running contrast in the book between what a person is when taken as a particular individual, and what he or she may appear to be when viewed as the bearer of a social role. Social role in Sterne always represents a way of masking, a form of deceit, and thus an evasion of the duties of the Christian life, whether the evasion takes the form of assuming a superior role or of transfixing another in an inferior one. By contrast, the revelation of one's own naked particularity, or the apprehension of the naked particularity of another, is always seen as the most fundamental kind of honesty: as both type and guarantor of virtue. If there is a Shakespearian parallel to Sterne's moral position it is to be found (significantly enough, given the moral contrast Nuttall seeks to establish between *Tristram Shandy* and *Lear*) not in Hamlet's rebuke to Guildenstern, but in Lear's vision of Edgar as manifesting the essence of humanity: 'Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.'

The contrast between accommodated and unaccommodated man is to be seen, for instance, in Sterne's portrayal of Yorick and of Slop. Yorick is introduced as having

> made himself a country-talk by a breach of all decorum, which he had committed against himself, his station, and his office; ——and that was, in never appearing better, or otherwise mounted, than upon a lean, sorry, jack-ass of a horse, value about one pound fifteen shillings; who, to shorten all description of him, was full brother to Rosinante, as far as similitude congenial could make him; . . . (I.x.47)

Out of modesty Yorick offers all kinds of humorous excuses for this eccentricity; but the real reason for it is that every good horse he buys is borrowed by some neighbour upon some 'piteous application' and ruined, so that in the end the expense of continually buying new horses becomes such 'as to disable him from any other act of generosity in his parish' (I.x.50).

Yorick's object in riding a spavined horse is, in other words, to regain his power to bestow charity upon other, and perhaps needier, objects than self-appointed ones. To achieve this end he is prepared to sacrifice the conventional dignities and appearances of his social role. His eccentricity, because it deprives him of the overt trappings of the parsonical role, reduces him in the eyes of many of his neighbours from a parson to a mere individual man, and one, moreover, contemptible by reason of the broken-down horse he rides. The dangers of this abandonment, in the pursuit of *imitatio Christi*, of the comforts and immunities of appearing to others less as a man than as a concept, are compounded by his indifference to the 'great wigs' who control preferment; for Yorick, while no enemy to 'gravity as such', has declared 'open war upon' the sort of gravity which serves to mask the vices of the individual beneath the solemn generalities of the type, so that 'whenever it fell in his way, however sheltered and protected, he seldom gave it much quarter'. It is the mark of his indifference to the masks of false gravity that he appears 'as heteroclite a creature in all his declensions . . . as the kindliest climate could have engendered and put together' (I.x.55).

We thus have in Yorick a version of Chaucer's poor parson turned Christian martyr: a holy fool who, because he is prepared, in the service of the Christian life, to give up concealing his naked particularity beneath the generalities of social role, is destroyed by those for whom the social universal and its dignities are indispensable tools of deceit. The Shandys stand with him in their refusal of masking and the gains to be derived from it. It is because none of the family would ever wear 'my great-aunt Dinah's old black velvet mask', which had grown 'a little bald about the chin by frequently putting off and on, *before* she was got with child by the coachman . . .', that 'in all our numerous family, for these four generations, we count no more than one archbishop, a Welch judge, some three or four aldermen, and a single mountebank——' (VIII.iii.517). Slop, on the other hand, is a monster of jealous professional pride, whose concern for the dignities of his role go to the length of venting Ernulphus's curse (obligingly furnished by My Father, who is fascinated to see how far he will go) upon the head of Obadiah, for no better reason than that the latter, by his clumsiness in tying the knots of the green baize bag, has made Slop look a fool.

Two preliminary points need making. The first is that Sterne's moral preference for the plainness and honesty of unadorned individuality is entirely Lockeian. Oddly enough, it is in this very spirit that Locke attacks metaphor as a device for veiling the plain truth of things in a cloud of fictitious universals; and this will bear remembering when we come to enquire into the exact nature of Sterne's defence of 'wit' and rhetoric against Locke's strictures. The second is that a moral preference for the Christian who, like Yorick, prefers the reality of charity to its appearance has more to do with the morality of respect for truth and sound judgement than it has to do with the morality of sentiment. Yorick at least does not go in for ecstasies of moral emotion; he gets down to the business of freeing himself to do what he conceives to be his job by the quickest route and without fuss; and since he is clearly as much part of the moral backbone of the book as Toby, any decent reading must make room for him.

A second aspect of Locke's philosophy with which Sterne is wholly, and this time explicitly, in sympathy is Locke's rejection of Cartesian dualism, embodied in the remark, famous in its time, that it is

> not much more remote from our comprehension to conceive that God can, if he pleases, superadd to matter a faculty of thinking, than that he should superadd to it another substance with a faculty of thinking; since we know not wherein thinking consists, nor to what sort of substances the Almighty has been pleased to give that power. . . . (*Essay*, IV.iii.6)

Voltaire refers to this passage with warm approval in the *Lettres philosophiques*. Sterne makes the issue it deals with one of those contested between Nosarians and Antinosarians:

> God's power is infinite, cried the Nosarians, he can do any thing.
>
> He can do nothing, replied the Antinosarians, which implies contradictions.
>
> He can make matter think, said the Nosarians.
>
> As certainly as you can make a velvet cap out of a sow's ear, replied the Antinosarians. (IV, Slawkenbergius' Tale, 266)

Sterne here is echoing Locke: there is no weight to the argument that, since matter could not be supposed to have the power of thought, the soul must be an immaterial substance, having no essential connection with the body, because the properties and powers of substances lie beyond the limits of possible human knowledge. Such questions are idle ones, fit only to be debated between Nosarians and Antinosarians.

I want to suggest, now, that this is one of the points – there are plenty of others, as we shall see, and their effect is cumulative – at which Sterne distances himself from the solipsism, and the consequent pessimism about communication on any rational level, which has so frequently been attributed to him in this century. Solipsism is the child of Cartesian dualism: it is those who believe that body and mind are distinct ontological realms having no essential connection between them who, when they reflect that all commerce with another is commerce with his or her body, are led ineluctably to the conclusion that all our conjectures about what is passing in another's mind are tragically and irremediably underdetermined by the *type* of evidence we have for them.

There are, though, two objections to this way of exonerating Sterne from solipsism which deserve to be considered. The first is that Locke's point against dualism is a negative one only; that to doubt whether it is possible for us to know the truth or falsity of dualism need not commit one, and did not in fact commit Locke, to any positive doctrine (of a Wittgensteinian or Merleau-Pontyan kind, for instance) affirming the essential unity of mind and body. This is perfectly correct as regards Locke, but misleading as regards Sterne; for Sterne did push beyond Lockeian doubt about dualism to a positive affirmation of an essential connection between body and mind:

> Lodovicus Sorbonensis makes this entirely an affair of the body (ἐξωτερικὴ πρᾶξις) as he calls it—but he is deceived: the soul and body are joint-sharers in every thing they get: A man cannot dress, but his ideas get cloathed at the same time; and if he dresses like a gentleman, every one of them stands presented to his imagination, genteelized along with him—so that he has nothing to do, but take his pen, and write like himself. (IX.xiii.587–8)

The second objection is that Locke, whatever doubts he may have entertained about dualism at the level of metaphysics, is firmly committed to it at the level of his epistemology, philosophy of language and philosophy of mind, and that his central commitment to 'ideas', which are certainly mental states in a sense agreeable to Cartesian dualism, as the objects about which all an individual's cognitive processes are ultimately exercised and in terms of which all the words he uses are ultimately defined, is quite sufficient in itself to commit him to some form of solipsism. Of course, Locke himself did not regard himself as a solipsist because he thought, absurdly, that words defined solely in terms of essentially private

objects could nevertheless serve as vehicles for public acts of communication; but it is not necessary to know that one is a solipsist to be one.

Once again, though, even if this argument, sketchy as it is, is more or less on the right lines as a critique of Locke, it does not necessarily follow that the critique contained in it transfers *pari passu* to Sterne. For Sterne, as we shall see, rejected the thesis that to understand how another speaker uses a word it is necessary to call up in one's mind a mental content – an idea – matching the corresponding mental content in the mind of the speaker. With it, of course, he necessarily rejected the thesis that the cognitive processes of each individual operate solely upon events private to that individual. One reason why *Tristram Shandy* has been taken as expounding some such view is that it is, in one aspect, an extended *reductio ad absurdum* of just that way of looking at things.

So far I have been drawing attention to aspects of Locke's nominalism which chimed in with Sterne's sense of the primacy, and in a certain sense the concreteness, of the individual person. There are other aspects of Locke's individualism which did not appeal to Sterne. Locke's theory of knowledge shares with his political theory a type of individualism which it would not be unfair to call 'propertarian'. Both are from one point of view theories of *justification*; they explain what it is to *have a right to* one's opinions or one's property. The explanations offered in the two cases are not dissimilar. Locke's political theory derives the individual's right to property from an original right to his own body and its powers which morally excludes both slavery and the surrender of absolute power to a sovereign. It is on the one hand the impossibility of separating the activity of the body, considered as labour, from what it has once been 'mixed with', and on the other hand the need to secure a material basis for independence of conscience, without which an individual's power to determine his own acts would be forfeit, which requires the extension of the original property right which an individual enjoys over his body to cover the fruits of his labour. Similarly, what gives a man the right to his opinions is his own mental labour, guided by familiar kinds of puritan virtue: independence of mind, disinclination to repose one's own views idly and slavishly upon those of others, refusal of the pleasures of metaphor and allusion in favour of the intellectual virtues of truthfulness, exact discrimination and sound judgement. The propertarian metaphor is directly applied to knowledge at the outset of Locke's *Essay*, when Locke characterizes the Reader he wishes to address as 'he who has raised himself above the alms-basket, and not content to live lazily on scraps of begged

opinions, sets his own thoughts on work, to find and follow truth . . .' (*Essay*, Epistle to the Reader).

Sterne not only notices this propertarianism of the mind, but explicitly mocks it: 'my father . . . picked up an opinion, Sir, as a man in a state of nature picks up an apple. – It becomes his own – and if he is a man of spirit, he would lose his life rather than give it up – ' (II.xxxiv.228). Elsewhere a mixture of Locke's theory of property and associationism is brought in to explain how it is that a woman of substance like Mrs Wadman cannot sit in her own house and think of a man without insensibly coming to regard him as her property:

> here, for her soul, she can see him in no light without mixing something of her own goods and chattels along with him—till by reiterated acts of such combination, he gets foisted into her inventory ——
>
> —And then good night. (VIII.viii.522)

Sterne's point, it hardly needs to be said, is that Locke's ideal reader is not to be found in nature. Our opinions are not, on the whole, the fruit of intellectual industry: we pick them up like apples or fall into them through habit; and the pertinacity with which we defend them is a comic parody of the righteous energy with which Locke's heroic individual defends, as the material basis of his exercise of independence of conscience, that with which he has mixed his labour.

Sterne's dislike of Locke's propertarian epistemology forms, I think, the background, necessary to full understanding, of his attack on Locke's distinction between Wit and Judgement. The two topics are certainly connected in Locke, the distinction forming an essential part of Locke's account of how the individual should order his dealings with language and with nature if he is to rise above the 'alms-basket' and set his own thoughts to work in pursuit of truth. The distinction is a very simple one. Wit, according to Locke, consists in 'the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy' (*Essay*, II.xi.2). Wit aims, in other words, not at truth but at pleasure. It is unhinged from the Reality Principle, and thus akin to madness, a connection which Locke draws explicitly in the chapter 'Of the Association of Ideas' which he added to the fourth edition of the *Essay*:

> Some of our ideas have a natural correspondence and connexion one with another; it is the office and excellency of our reason to trace these, and hold them together in that union and correspondence which is founded in their peculiar beings. Besides this, there is another connexion of ideas

> wholly owing to chance or custom: ideas that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some men's minds that it is very hard to separate them. . . . When this combination is settled, and whilst it lasts, it is not in the power of reason to help us, and relieve us from the effects of it. (*Essay*, II.xxxiii.5/13)

The role of Lockeian judgement 'lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully one from another ideas wherein can be found the least difference, *thereby to avoid being misled by similitude*' (*Essay*, II.xi.2; my italics). The task of Judgement, in other words, is to pierce through the deceits of Wit to those plain facts of 'natural correspondence and connexion' which 'it is the office and excellency of our reason to trace'.

Why did Sterne think this seemingly rather sensible distinction so pernicious? One reason, as he makes clear in the Author's Preface, with its engaging analogy of Wit and Judgement as two knobs on the back of the same chair, which would look absurd without either, is that Locke's way of distinguishing them turns Wit and Judgement into irreconcilable opposites, so that it becomes hard to see, if one accepts the justice of what Locke says, how one and the same mind could lead both the Life of Judgement, as it were, and the Life of Wit. But I do not think this goes quite to the heart of the matter. Locke's account of Judgement describes, in a rough-and-ready way, the characteristic stance of a trained scientific observer whose job is to record natural regularities. From this it is a short step to the thought that the members of a community wholly dedicated to the life of Lockeian judgement would not be sharply differentiated, or easily differentiable, as individuals. For what could differentiate them? What Lockeian judgement does for us is to make us into efficient recording devices; and to the extent that a recording device *is* efficient – unpolluted, for instance, by the inanities of Lockeian wit – it will say exactly the same thing as any other efficient recording device.

But how am I to enter into any sort of human relationship with a being which, because it has opted exclusively for Lockeian judgement, operates exclusively like that? Normally, when I am addressed by another human being, I encounter a sharply differentiated personality whose uniqueness expresses itself in the style of every utterance and gesture: a being 'heteroclite in all its dimensions'. The conversation of a being exclusively given over to Lockeian judgement, since it would consist entirely in the recital of types and instances of 'natural correspondence and connexion', would afford no such possibilities of differentiation. But now we see the oddity

inherent in the idea of entering into ordinary human relationships with *either* the Lockeian Man of Judgement *or* the Lockeian Man of Wit. If I cannot be *addressed* (but only informed) by a barometer in good working order, neither can I be addressed by a deranged barometer.

I do not, of course, think that this thought occurred to Sterne in just this form. But we have textual evidence that a thought did occur to him which comes to much the same thing. Sterne, notoriously, prided himself on the 'dramatic' qualities of his sermons. Such a sermon, like *Tristram Shandy* itself, is a work of pathetic Wit. But the object of such a sermon is not to give pleasure; rather its purpose is to hold up a mirror to the congregation which hears it; to invite them to reflect seriously on themselves, to *see* themselves *in a new light*. The author of such sermons is thus less well placed than most people to accept Locke's contention that the aim of Wit is not truth but pleasure. In the Author's Preface Sterne makes just this sermon-writer's claim for the cognitive aims and powers of Wit: it holds up a mirror; not, admittedly, to extra-human Nature, but to its hearers and readers as individual human beings.

> Didius, the great church lawyer, in his code *de fartandi et illustrandi fallaciis*, doth maintain and make fully appear, That an illustration is no argument,—nor do I maintain the wiping of a looking-glass clean, to be a syllogism; — but you all, may it please your worships, see the better for it. . . . (III.xx.203)

The reference to the looking-glass here provides compelling textual evidence that Sterne's reason for disliking Locke's denigration of Wit is not merely the trade-union one that it makes life difficult for 'poor Wits', but the philosophical (to be precise, epistemological) one that Lockeian judgement, while it may suffice to reveal natural regularity in the physical world, cannot focus upon the particular beings that we are. Wit, like a looking-glass, in other words, is needed to *show us ourselves*, to allow us to bring into focus what is particular and idiosyncratic about our mental physiognomies, in order that we may become less like Phutatorius or the 'great wigs' who persecute Yorick, who appear in their own estimation less as individual men than as beings so clothed in the dignified generalities of status and role as to resemble so many perambulating universals.

If we put this together with Sterne's mockery of Locke's propertarian theory of knowledge, and with his insistence that Wit and Judgement are complementaries rather than opposites, we see what he would be at. As individual human beings we are creatures of Wit, our minds formed not by intellectual labour directed towards the

accurate tracing of natural regularities, but by the accumulation over time of ideas picked up in ways determined by all the hazards of personal predilection and circumstance. Our tenure of the acres of the mind is not *de jure* but only *de facto*. Only Wit – exercised with judgement – can offer such creatures a mirror in which to perceive themselves. Wit so understood, however, is not Locke's *Wit*: a pleasant verbal game for intellectual wastrels with the real possibility of a resulting madness lurking in the background. I think it is perhaps because of the Lockeian assimilation of wit to madness that the family name of the Shandys is a dialect word for a madman or eccentric: it is to point the moral that human life takes over from the recording of natural regularity at exactly the point at which, for Locke, madness (or Wit) takes over from Judgement. But the whole point of this seemingly perverse grasping of the Lockeian nettle is, as we shall see, that there is a way of understanding the nature and role in human life of the verbal devices of wit which altogether blunts its sting, and makes wit not the opposite but the necessary partner of judgement. To pursue that understanding, however, we must turn to Sterne's treatment of language and the meaning of words.

III

Toby and Mrs Wadman are at a standstill over the different meanings they attach to the word 'place'. Sterne's authorial voice intervenes: 'This requires a second translation:——it shews what little knowledge is got by mere words – we must go up to the first springs' (IX.x.595). Is what we are witnessing in this passage Fluchère's *faillite de la logique et des arts du langage*? Does it, and others like it, offer evidence for Nuttall's suggestion that, 'while Locke retained his faith in the intellect and mistrusted the sub-rational part of the human mind, Sterne may be said to have presented the opposite view'?[10]

In one sense the tenor of the passage is entirely Lockeian. Abuse of medieval and Aristotelian philosophy for trifling with words, and an accompanying parade of mistrust of language *per se* is an intellectual fashion that comes into England with the Renaissance and the first stirrings of the scientific revolution. Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley; all have their ritual expressions of mistrust of language, and all affirm in one way or another that 'we must go up to the first springs'. Locke, in his chapter 'Of the Imperfection of Words', observes that 'The imperfection of words is the doubtfulness of their signification' (*Essay*, III.ix.4). Doubtfulness of signification has various causes. The ideas words stand for are sometimes very complex; the ideas

brought together under a single name sometimes have no 'certain connexion in nature', and so no 'settled standard any where in nature existing to rectify and adjust them by', and so on. Locke's remedy for these and other imperfections is the apparently sound and scientific one of giving exact definitions and sticking to them. By definition, after all, we may hope to make it absolutely clear and determinate which ideas are supposed to be called up by which word.

The object of purifying language in this way is to transform it into the fit instrument of Lockeian judgement: a neutral recording device by whose means everything in the world can be made known and rendered intelligible to anyone, no matter what his or her individual standpoint. But to formulate the Lockeian ideal of a perfect language in this way is at once to reveal that it is in a certain respect self-defeating. Language so purified can render an account and mediate an understanding of every particular in the world save one: another individual speaker. For to encounter another speaker is precisely to encounter a use of words, a connection of word with idea, different from my own. And the difference is not merely that he or she labels familiar groups of ideas in an unfamiliar way: says 'refute' where I would say 'rebut', or something of the sort. If that were the extent of the difficulty, Lockeian punctiliousness in the definition of terms could suffice to deal with it.

The difficulty goes deeper: it is that the Other *connects up ideas* in a different way: perceives different patterns of connection and relationship in the world. Sterne rubs the reader's, and Locke's, nose in this difficulty in the celebrated passage in which news of Master Bobby's death reaches the servants' hall:

> ——My young master in London is dead! said Obadiah—
>
> ——A green satin night-gown of my mother's, which had been twice scoured, was the first idea which Obadiah's exclamation brought into Susannah's head.—Well might Locke write a chapter upon the imperfections of words. (v.vii.354)

Why should one not read the last sentence of this absolutely straight, as an entirely unironic comment on the impossibility of communication by means of language given the difficulties of engineering a stable transmission of 'ideas' from one mind to another by words alone? What militates against such a reading is, of course, the fact that there can be no serious question here but that Susannah has *understood perfectly well what Obadiah is saying*. If she had not grasped the import of his words – that Bobby is dead – her mind could not have leapt, as it does, to the green satin nightgown she expects to be given as a consequence of Mrs Shandy's going into

mourning. So, in the sense Locke has in mind of an impediment in the smooth transmission of factual information from speaker to hearer, Obadiah's words suffer from no 'imperfection' at all; on the contrary, they have performed their task admirably. What is imperfect must then be – can only be – Locke's account of how the transmission of information by means of words is accomplished. It cannot, that is, be by means of the standardized, machine-like binding of idea to word which Locke postulates, and which allows no difference in the reconstruction of the world as a network of connections of ideas between one rational mind and another, since the entirely idiosyncratic but entirely plausible dance of associations in Susannah's mind shows us, by the way in which it not only fails to impede her understanding of what Obadiah is saying, but actually depends upon that understanding, that that must be nonsense; and so serves to remind us once again of the gap between plausible philosophical theorizing and the everyday facts of human experience and the everyday functioning of language.

But if language as we have it functions perfectly well, what can Sterne mean when he says, apropos of Toby and Mrs Wadman, 'it shews what little knowledge is got by mere words'? If that is not an expression of mistrust of language, what is it?

Well, Sterne certainly does warn us (like Fielding, another sceptic where lexicography was concerned) not to trust *definitions*; but he mistrusts *them*, it appears, because *they* manifest in turn a mistrust of the ordinary confidence in the workings of language which, in most of the occasions of everyday life, we share with one another, and which is an expression, perhaps, of deeper kinds of trust in one another. 'Eugenius, said I, stepping before him, and laying my hand upon his breast, – to define – is to distrust' (III.xxi.225). Definition and translation, as Quine has taught us, are close kin in so far as each comforts our inability to understand words by offering us other words. What Sterne is saying about Mrs Wadman's 'I will not touch it' is that in such a case definition – 'translation' – besides being mistrustful is no help: '——we must go up to first springs'. Going up to first springs here can only mean grasping the nature of Mrs Wadman's worries about Toby's wound. Locke, in his chapters upon the imperfections of words and their remedy, assumes throughout that rational discourse and thought are only possible if it is in the power of *the word alone* to determine which ideas it will evoke in a reader's mind. It is in the attempt to give words this power, in effect to nullify what Derrida calls *différance* or *dissémination*, that Locke embarks upon the first of many empiricist programmes for the purification of language.

But, of course, words can have no such power. As I have, in effect, argued in Chapter 1, what 'ideas' a word evokes must depend partly upon the situation of its users and hearers, so that the connection between word and idea in each particular case can only be grasped by coming to understand that situation.[11] I need to know a person's history – how he or she has come to inhabit the particular standpoint from the midst of which she or he speaks and understands, before I can know how word and idea will come together in his or her mind. It is to this end that Sterne offers us in *Tristram Shandy*, though in a very different sense from Locke, 'a history . . . of what passes in a man's own mind'. The history uncovered by Locke's 'historical plain method' is, as I noted earlier, a history of *justification*: a tale told to establish a right, to own property or to lay claim to knowledge. Sterne's history is not that. Rather, it is a tale told in order that we may understand what the words in which it is told mean to the teller; and understanding that, understand him.

The need to unfold such histories is one of the main motors of Sterne's digressiveness. Thus uncle Toby is left at the outset suspended at the start of a sentence, because 'to enter rightly into my uncle Toby's sentiments upon this matter, you must be made to enter first a little into his character . . .' (I.xxi.87). But 'entering into his sentiments', as Sterne understands it, is not a matter of being told a few psychological generalities. We must be made familiar with Toby's entire life to date. We must learn of his conduct at the siege of Namur, of his convalescence, of his relationship with Trim and the origins of his hobby-horse, before we are equipped to understand a word he says.

Two things are to be noticed here. The first is that these narrations, to be effective, require the concurrence of both wit and judgement: wit because it is the faculty which detects congruity, and what we have to grasp are the alien congruities which have impressed another as important; judgement because it is the faculty which assesses difference, and what we have to assess is the gap of difference which separates another, 'heteroclite in all his dimensions', from us and from his fellows. The second is that, when we have heard, and with a due exercise of wit and judgement understood, Toby's history, we really are in a position to understand what he says: 'to enter rightly into his sentiments'. This is the ultimate, clinching reason why I find in Sterne no trace of the tragic sense of the isolation of separate Cartesian consciousnesses detected in him by Priestley, Nuttall and so many others. For Sterne the issue is never how we are to penetrate to a character's *consciousness*, conceived in classical Cartesian fashion as a theatre of purely spiritual events having no essential

connection with the body; but simply how we are to make sense of what he or she *says*. Hence Sterne's refusal of the aid of Momus' glass, by whose aid we might have 'viewed the soul stark naked'. We do not need it, because we can 'draw my uncle Toby's character from his HOBBY-HORSE' (I.xxiii.98). And again, when Toby sends his humble service to Slop under the impression that the latter is making a bridge not for Tristram's nose but for Toby's fortifications,

> Had my uncle Toby's head been a Savoyard's box, and my father peeping in all the time at one end of it, —it could not have given him a more distinct conception of the operations of my uncle Toby's imagination than what he had.... (II.xxvi.221)

There are, in short, plenty of highly particularized subjects in Sterne, but no trace whatsoever of the Cartesian *présence* on which all literary celebration of the individual is supposed in some quarters to depend. There is plenty of verbal confusion dividing one character from another, true enough. But, first, to be divided from another person momentarily by a different way of taking words is not at all the same thing as being divided from others *per se* in the *in principle* irremediable way envisaged by the type of philosophical sceptic who has been with us since Descartes. And, secondly, it is precisely the verbal confusions to which Sterne's characters fall victim which, when taken in the context of situation and standpoint, make the workings of their minds transparently clear, both to us as readers and to other characters in the novel.

But what, it will be asked, is My Father, if not an object-lesson in the impotence of language and rationality to achieve genuine communication between differently constituted individuals? He is an object-lesson in the impotence of the verbal, and of a style of reasoning which restricts itself to the shuffling of words against other words, to achieve that; which is not quite the same thing. As such he constitutes, among other things, a Lockeian deconstruction of Locke's contention that judgement lives by opposition to wit; for the more My Father tries to live by Lockeian judgement alone, the more he becomes a monster of Lockeian wit, the weeded garden of his mind continually foundering under the luxuriance of his private fantasies and obsessions.

Mutual incomprehension is not, as a matter of fact, either a constant or a universal condition of life for the inhabitants of Shandy Hall. Toby and Trim, generally speaking, understand one another perfectly. Mrs Shandy understands her husband well enough to allow him absolute precedence in verbal disputation while keeping all practical matters of concern to the good order of the household

entirely under her own control. And both Yorick and Toby, on occasion, understand Walter's metaphysical conceits well enough to rebuke him for them. What injures My Father's understanding, and his ability either to understand or to make himself understood by others, is simply his desire to reduce everything, including the death of one son and the upbringing of the other, to words. He believes implicitly in the Lockeian ideal of language as a neutral recording device by means of which all knowledge and all understanding may be conveyed to a man without his ever needing to change the standpoint from which he looks at things; a view of language which, as we have seen, comes to be sharply at odds both with Locke's empiricism and with his nominalist respect for the particular the moment we attempt to apply it to the special case of knowledge and understanding of other human individuals. I cannot understand another without admitting the possibility of a standpoint alien to my own. I cannot understand her, or him, if I insist that the words in which that understanding is to be formulated must be my words, honouring just those conceptual distinctions which my discourse honours, resonant with just those connotations with which they have always resonated for me.

One way of replying to this would be to argue that the Other has no grip on the language I use, because what words mean depends not on their intersections with the lives, interests and predicaments of individuals, but simply on other words. My Father, not unlike some recent critics, is, though passionately interested in the intersection of language with itself, profoundly uninterested in its intersection with the extra-linguistic. When Toby, frustrated by his inability to explain to his visitors in words the technicalities of fortification, finds 'his life . . . put in jeopardy by words' (II.ii.108), he takes the obvious step of securing a large map of the fortifications of Namur and having it pasted down upon a board. He thus restores his lines of communication with others by considering how words are involved with things and doing what is necessary to make his tale comprehensible to others *from their point of view*; while incidentally laying the foundations of the hobby which secures both his physical recovery and his future mental health. One feels that the response of his brother, faced with the same difficulty, would have been to settle down to write a treatise analogous to the *Tristrapaedia*, which would have settled the exact definition of terms in fortification, but would have left the problem of communication with visitors exactly where it stood when Toby bought his map.

It seems to me, in short, that what differentiates the two Shandy brothers in the novel is not the contrast between reason and feeling,

the rational and the sub-rational; but rather the contrast between two types of rationality, one verbal, self-enclosed and trusting more in the power of definition to regiment the meanings of words than in the possibility that an attentive and inquiring attitude to others might allow their meanings room to emerge; the other more interested in empirical enquiry than in disputation; prepared to let words and their meanings wait upon the investigation of things and their properties. It is, of course, commonplace for the New Philosophy of the century preceding Sterne to distinguish in its own favour between its own mathematical and empirical interests and the allegedly merely verbal and disputatious pursuits of the Schoolmen. One thinks of the stinging abuse heaped on the Aristotelians by Hobbes in the chapter 'Of Darkness through Vain Philosophy' in the *Leviathan*; or of Locke's self-effacing praise of the 'mighty designs' afoot in 'an age that produces such masters as the great Huygenius and the incomparable Mr Newton, with some other of that strain' in the Epistle to the Reader which opens the *Essay*. Readers who take uncle Toby's hobby-horse to be no more than an engagingly dotty obsession with as much and as little claim to be taken seriously as Walter's parallel obsessions with Noseology or the *Tristrapaedia* miss something here, I think. For when we turn to Sterne's list, in Volume II, of the reading undertaken by Toby in pursuit of his interest in warfare we find not only that it is very heavy reading indeed, in the mathematics of ballistics and the practical engineering of fortifications, but that it includes many of the leading natural scientists of the day, including Galileo and Torricelli:

> Towards the beginning of the third year . . . my uncle Toby found it necessary to understand a little of projectiles: – And having judged it best to draw his knowledge from the fountain-head, he began with N. Tartaglia . . . He proceeded next to Galileo and Torricellius. . . .
>
> (II.iii.110)

Sterne ends this passage with a gesture of mock horror at the intricacy of the mazes into which Toby's reading is leading him, ' – O my uncle! my uncle Toby'; but the point is made all the same. Toby's reading, and the systematic urge he displays to penetrate further and further into the mathematical intricacies of the physical world mark him as a man of the new age as surely as Walter's obsession with words and definition marks him as a figure rooted in the medieval past as viewed from the perspective of the New Philosophy. One of the things Sterne wishes us to note, I think, is the way in which Toby's interest in the facts of ballistics is of a piece with his interest in

the facts of other people's lives – his willingness to sit patiently and listen while the Other unfolds his story – and contrasts with Walter's tendency to reduce everything to a skein of words emptily mirroring other words.

It is worth pointing out once again that the moral predilections Sterne displays here, just as in the case of his preference for Yorick's unadorned plain Christianity over the pomp of the 'great wigs' who destroy him, are thoroughly Lockeian ones. Locke, after all, is in his period the philosopher above all others who recalls us from mazy verbal speculation to attentive enquiry into the empirical and the particular. Sterne's modest point is merely that the great philosopher's epistemology and theory of language, while perhaps well adapted to secure these admirable aims in the study of the natural world, are ludicrously ill-adapted to secure them in the study of our fellow creatures, and so provide not only a fit but a proper object of ridicule for a ludic novel which, none the less, has its moral dimension. This brings me, finally, to the crucial issue of the moral outlook of *Tristram Shandy*, and its alleged exaltation of the passional over the cognitive in morals.

IV

Volume VIII contains two vignettes which are seldom discussed but which seem to me to touch the nerve of Sterne's moral outlook. In the first, Trim is about to begin his story of the King of Bohemia and his seven castles when Toby notices – 'the eye of goodness espieth all things', interjects Sterne's narratorial voice, neatly making precisely the connection between virtue and cognition which critics allege to be absent from the book – that Trim's Montero-cap, which he values intensely because it was a present from his brother Tom before the latter was gaoled by the Inquisition, is lying on the grass instead of decorating Trim's head. Toby touches it interrogatively with his cane, and Trim picks it up, but

> casting a glance of humiliation as he did it, upon the embroidery of the fore-part, which being dismally tarnished and frayed moreover in some of the principal leaves and boldest parts of the pattern, he laid it down again betwixt his two feet, in order to moralize upon the subject.
>
> —'Tis every word of it but too true, cried my uncle Toby, that thou art about to observe—
>
> —'*Nothing in this world, Trim, is made to last for ever.*'
>
> —But when tokens, dear Tom, of thy love and remembrance wear out, said Trim, what shall we say? (VIII.xix.535)

This introduces a long passage of wonderful, crazy and intimate conversational meandering between Toby and Trim, in which they wander from the story of the King of Bohemia and his castles (which never gets told) to various details of their own campaigning, in the course of which Trim tells the history of his own wound and his convalescent relationship with the fair Beguine, his first experience of love. Sterne's capacity to depict servants as real, individual people, with neither sentimentality nor condescension, touched on already in the case of Susannah and Obadiah, shows to good effect here.

The second vignette also involves Trim's Montero-cap. My Father is expressing scepticism about the prospects of a marriage between Toby and Mrs Wadman. Trim loyally stands up for his master:

> I would lay my Montero-cap, said Trim—now Trim's Montero-cap, as I once told you, was his constant wager; and having furbished it up that very night, in order to go upon the attack—it made the odds look more considerable—I would lay, an' please your honour, my Montero-cap to a shilling—was it proper, continued Trim (making a bow), to offer a wager before your honours—
>
> —There is nothing improper in it, said my father—'tis a mode of expression; for in saying thou would'st lay thy Montero-cap to a shilling—all thou meanest is this—that thou believest—
>
> —Now, What do'st thou believe? (VIII.xxxiv.562–3)

Note how here, as in other passages at which Sterne sets the wisdom which reveals itself in Trim's untutored conversation against My Father's settled conviction of his brother's servant's near-idiocy, My Father's tolerant contempt puts Trim in his social place. My Father accepts neither Trim's freedom of speech nor his apology for it. Nor does he *waive* the proffered apology; he merely dismisses it as unnecessary on the grounds that Trim's offer to wager his Montero-cap is in any case little more than unmeaning blather. Trim is, in effect, reduced from the status of a fellow human being, whose apologies one either waives, rejects or accepts, to that of a natural phenomenon whose babblings are not to be taken seriously as demanding a response in kind, but are more properly to be treated as subjects for dispassionate and objective intellectual analysis on the part of Trim's intellectual and social superiors.

The analysis to which My Father proceeds to subject Trim's remark is, moreover, of an entirely verbal kind, somewhat redolent of an entry for an Analysis competition in the heyday of what used to be called Ordinary Language Philosophy. Its thesis is that 'I will wager my Montero-cap to a shilling that p' means the same thing as 'I believe that p'. In one sense of 'means' this is fair enough: My

Father's analysans does more or less catch what its analysandum *comes to*. But there is more to catching another person's meaning than the ability to say what his remarks, literally speaking, come to. What My Father's bit of reductive analysis leaves out is what the Montero-cap means to Trim. It is his constant wager because of its associations for him. He swears by what he is; by all that he feels for his brother Tom. Swearing by that before Toby, moreover, he swears before and on behalf of someone who knows and understands by what he swears; who is intimate with Tom, the Jew's widow, the fair Beguine and the other figures who people Trim's narrative imagination and make him what he is, as the figures who people Tristram's narrative imagination make *him* what *he* is. In choosing his Montero-cap as his wager Trim aligns his trust in and admiration for Toby with what is for him the paradigm of confidence, his trust in his relationship to his brother Tom. All this is invisible to Walter, because, as usual, he is more interested in chopping words than in paying attention.

The moral to be drawn from the contrast between these two episodes, it seems to me, is that while Toby's capacity to feel for others is certainly a part of his goodness, it is not the whole of it, and not as central a part of it as his capacity to observe and listen. 'The eye of goodness espieth all things.' Toby's goodness is not just a matter of Humean sentiment, but includes an essential cognitive component. There is nothing 'sub-rational', for instance, about the way in which Toby anticipates exactly what Trim is about to say about the state of his cap, unless one is prepared to say that insight into what is passing in another's mind stemming from an intelligent and compassionate interest in that person's history and situation is not an exercise of rationality. Occasionally, of course, this capacity for putting himself in another's place goes over the top, as in the frequently quoted passage in which Toby apostrophizes the fly and sets it at liberty. But even this is not just an excess of *feeling*, but an attempt to push the comprehension of alien *situations* beyond all feasible limit. The case contrasts with the other frequently cited episode in which Tristram feeds a macaroon to an ass. This, it seems to me, is to be read, not as Sterne guiltily noticing how easily high-flown moral sentimentalism shades into moral self-indulgence and trying to pass it as a joke, but as part of the status of the book as a *memorial* to Toby and Yorick. It is essential to this side of the book that Tristram should not appear as the moral equal of Toby. In the case of the ass the difference is precisely that whereas Tristram finds himself all too self-consciously caught up both in the pleasures of benevolence and in the oddity of seeing whether an ass will eat a

macaroon, Toby, as in the case of the fly, would have been wholly preoccupied with the job of grasping and responding to the situation of the ass.

Toby's interest in understanding others' situations brings it about that for him, as for Sterne himself, the unit of meaning is the complete conversational transaction, taken in the context both of immediate situation and of the personal histories which lie behind it. So for him, the pursuit of understanding involves turning towards people, hearing out their stories – that of Le Fever is another example – and so 'entering into their sentiments': into the particular inflections of meaning and connotation that words and things acquire in the context of a personal history.

My Father pursues a different conception of understanding, founded upon the hope of mastering the human confusions of Shandy Hall by exhaustively describing and explaining them in some neutral and universal language of scientific explanation: a language, to use Derrida's words, '*sans différance . . . à la fois absolument vive et absolument morte*'.[12] Thus his first thought, when presented by Mrs Shandy with a son to bring up, is not to turn towards the child, to listen to what he will say, to hear what strange twist of *différance*, of Wit, he will give to language; but to turn away from him towards words, towards the petrified, witless language of Lockeian judgement, and to compose a manual for the child's education: a *Tristrapaedia*. But the fate of the *Tristrapaedia* is identical with that of Tristram's project of recounting his life in the novel we are reading. Life moves on, and overflows the toils of language. Tristram is effectively brought up by Mrs Shandy, and My Father is left, at what I find the bleakest moment of the book, 'drawing a sun-dial, for no better purpose than to be buried under ground' (v.xxi.369).

My Father's urge to desert the concrete trials of the relationship between father and son by sublimating it into words goes with a more generalized Manichaean contempt for the concrete, the bodily and the particular. He is happiest with the mental and the universal, which no doubt goes far to explain his son's love-affair with Locke. Nuttall is right, I think, to discern in Sterne a fundamental disrespect for the distinction, which so mesmerized the Augustans, between the rational and the animal part of our natures. But where Nuttall sees a slack and rather shifty disregard for a distinction still worthy of respect, I see a deliberate and largely successful attempt to subvert an intellectual delusion. When Walter, platonizing after Ficinus, attempts to instruct Toby and Yorick in the distinction between two kinds of love, one rational, the other natural, Toby (this is one of

the points at which he catches Walter's drift perfectly adequately) responds, 'Pray, brother, what has a man who believes in God to do with this?' My Father does not believe that 'soul and body are joint-sharers in all they get'. He wants soul to be in the saddle, and adopts Hilarion the hermit's way of speaking of his body as his ass; an eccentricity which with poetic justice leads him into the public appearance of having made a coarse and brutal jest calling into question his brother's sexual powers when Toby innocently takes this odd turn of phrase to embody a kindly enquiry concerning his wound.

This anti-Manichaean burlesque of Sterne's seems to me, as I suggested a moment ago, very much of a piece with his admiration for Locke. Besides the obvious Lockeian echoes – the redirection of attention from universals to particulars, the scepticism about dualism, the insistence on the importance of accurate attention to the empirical detail of things – which I have now, perhaps, stressed *ad nauseam*, there is a deeper Lockeian flavour to this aspect of Sterne's comedy. The aim of Locke's philosophy is to reconcile the impulse towards theory with the practical and empirical side of our life by showing that all effective theorizing is rooted in the latter and cannot in the end transcend it.

> Men may find matter sufficient to busy their heads and occupy their hands with variety, delight, and satisfaction, if they will not boldly quarrel with their own constitution, and throw away the blessings their hands are filled with, because they are not big enough to grasp every thing. (Essay, I.i.5)

A parallel reconciliation seems to me to be the central aim of Sterne's comedy: the heart of the Shandyan vision of things. From a Shandyan viewpoint we are not rational spirits tethered to the bodies of brutes. We are creatures formed by accident and circumstance; our very language constituted as much by Wit as by Judgement. But we can nevertheless hope to achieve something in the way of order, community and mutual understanding if, instead of turning away to the endless, deserted vistas of verbal analysis and explication which invite us when we attempt to treat ourselves as objects for scientific or pseudo-scientific dissection, we turn towards one another and listen, while a story is told, a history unfolded. This, rather than the Humean assertion of the priority of something called 'feeling' over something called 'reason', is what seems to me to be at stake in *Tristram Shandy*. As I have tried to show, the moral outlook of the novel is less schematic and also less banal than that. It is an outlook from which we ourselves could learn something.