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reads

*Shandean Humour in English and
German Literature and Philosophy*

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edited by Klaus Vieweg, James Vigus, and Kathleen M. Wheeler

AS MOST COMEDIANS ACKNOWLEDGE, there are some fundamental laws to comedy. One is that comedy is largely dependent upon location; it does not travel well over long distances. The world continues to shrink, but the rule still generally holds true. Laurence Sterne wrestled with this issue while pitching the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy*. In trying to sell his book to Robert Dodsley, he promised the London publisher that he had purged it of all things provincial: ‘All Locality is taken out of the Book [...] & the whole made more saleable’.¹ Another rule is that humour is illogical, or resists logical explanation at the very least. ‘Shandy’, after all, originally referred to something crack-brained and crazy.² When Sir Horace Mann claimed ‘You will laugh at me, I suppose, when I say I don’t understand *Tristram Shandy*, because it was probably the intention of the author that nobody should’, he had arrived at much the same conclusion.³

Nevertheless, this collection of nine essays from *Legenda* attempts to defy those rules. *Shandean Humour* considers how Sterne’s comedy influenced not only the creative philosophy of an English writer like Coleridge, but also that of a number of Continental authors as well as the American Herman Melville. It sustains the interest in the reception of Sterne’s work around the globe—as initiated by *The Shandean* and *The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe* (2004)—while using Sterne as one strand with which to trace the development of European literary culture from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. In doing so, it also engages with the current preoccupation with how to conceptualize Sternean humour, as illustrated by the essays of *Hilarion’s Asse* (2013) overseen by Peter de Voogd. But with its geographical scope and the authorial connections it explores, *Shandean Humour* is far more ambitious. While giving humour a theoretical basis, it presents such writers as Jean Paul Richter, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel—and even Karl Marx—as Sterne’s heirs. However, the collection does not fail to recognize that Sterne was an avid appropriator himself, with Kathleen Wheeler considering his debt to Rabelais, Burton, and Swift.

The first two essays are both provocative and problematic. Wolfgang Müller provides an incisive and expert analysis of the stylistic and rhetorical devices of *Tristram Shandy* in the attempt to locate Shandean humour in the minutiae of

¹ Laurence Sterne, *The Letters, Part I: 1739-1764*, ed. M. New and P. de Voogd (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 97.

² William Marshall, *The Rural Economy of Yorkshire* (London: T. Cadell, 1788), II. 351.

³ Arthur H. Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years* (London: Methuen, 1986), 236.

Sterne's prose. On the whole, however, Müller operates within a critical vacuum despite having conclusions which echo or gesture towards earlier work on Sterne. For example, his observations on 'the performance quality' of Sterne's prose—with 'unconnected clauses' separated by dashes to communicate both 'automatic, jerky actions' and the eruption of passion 'in the form of uncontrolled actions' (21, 28)—could be a simplification of chapter 2 from Oakley's *A Culture of Mimicry* (2010). Moreover, in an essay that concentrates upon textual details, Müller does not use the Florida edition of Sterne's work which is recognized as the authoritative standard. Sterne's followers can become very excitable where the arrangement of the printed word is concerned.

As with Müller's contribution, the following essay by Verena Olejniczak Lobsien perhaps illustrates the pitfalls open to an early modern specialist who moonlights in a different field. After acknowledging that 'there is widespread agreement among critics that *Tristram Shandy* is above all fun', Lobsien then asserts 'my own reading of his text seems compatible with this view — if at all — only after severe qualifications' (31). It is enough to make an aficionado of Sterne splutter in disbelief. For Lobsien, *Tristram Shandy* is an extended reflection upon mortality, despondency, and frustration that should be placed within the Renaissance tradition of writing about melancholia. 'Above all', she claims, '*Tristram Shandy* presents life as damaged: without exception, its main characters fall short of their possibilities; they are in various ways disabled, mutilated (preferably castrated), brought to a standstill' (37). In this reading, Walter becomes 'a frustrated pensioner' and Toby indulges a troubling and 'narcissistic emotionality' (37, 40). You have to admire Lobsien's invention in the creation of such a sustained discussion that cuts against the grain of Sterne's playful narrative. But for all of the fresh perspectives that she offers with their power to provoke discussion, this is still a fundamentally perverse reading that tries to dismiss a large part of the critical canon a little too easily.

When James Vigus quotes Tristram's command to his followers—that they should exercise 'patience' and keep their 'temper' (104)—the reader of this collection will be rewarded if such advice is heeded. The following two essays by Vigus offer perceptive readings of Sterne's sphere of influence. His first suggests that Sterne and David Hume—who are traditionally viewed as dinner-table antagonists—may have had a lot in common, not least 'a shared sense of humour [which] seems to have bridged their differences' (56). Vigus proposes that in the 'search for personal identity', their sense of failure was 'displaced by the sociable medicine of humour, whose result is not an increased scepticism, but rather a new empirical certainty about character' (57). Such propositions are intriguing and deserve further investigation.

The same can be said about his survey of Coleridge's literary relationship to Sterne. A consideration of how Coleridge found 'Jean Paul's work an especially congenial source and catalyst' when lecturing upon Sterne (98) leads to a discussion of the 'many Shandean traits' of *Biographia Literaria* with 'the crowning affinity' being 'the anxious attitude toward the audience' in both texts

(104). However, Coleridge's reputation for being humourless—as reported by Thomas Carlyle—is reinforced by his moralistic judgements upon Sterne. In *Table Talk*, he prudishly claimed 'Sterne's morals are bad [...] to be sure the book is scarcely readable by women' (101). As an admirer, he could be scathing of what he saw as imperfections:

All the evil achieved by Hobbes and the whole School of Materialists will appear inconsiderable if it be compared with the mischief effected and occasioned by the sentimental Philosophy of Sterne, and his numerous imitators. The vilest appetites and the most remorseless inconstancy towards their objects acquired the title of *the Heart, the irresistible Feelings, the too tender Sensibility* (99).

In frowning upon Sterne's 'affected sensibility' and 'indecenty' (99), he seems to have held views that chimed with much early nineteenth-century opinion. While being representative of his time—albeit sometimes as an extreme example as in the quotation above—Coleridge touched upon issues that still preoccupy critical debates about Sterne, such as the question of how to evaluate sensibility when 'cultivating sensitive feelings in solitude' may lead 'not to moral improvement but to a selfishness that is the very opposite of sympathy' (100). Overall, it is never in doubt that Coleridge was preoccupied with Sterne and wrote under the influence despite recoiling from Shandean smut in the pursuit of an intellectual humour. With other candidates, such as Lamb and De Quincey, there is the potential for a book-length study of Sterne's impact upon the English Romantics.

Vigus constructs a persuasive argument while aided by an abundant number of sources. Some of the other academics in this volume attempt to make similarly ingenious connections while having less material to work with. After straining to build a critical framework in which to situate Sterne and their chosen author, some contributors run out of steam when it comes to making their comparisons stick. In discussing Melville's *The Confidence-Man, His Masquerade* (1857), Wheeler offers such observations as 'the *Con-Man*, like *Tristram Shandy*, draws on both contemporary life and controversies, as well as on written sources, often focusing upon the literary rogue' and 'as with *Tristram Shandy*, we find vastly different chapter lengths, from over twenty in chapter 40 to a third of a page in chapter 31' (131). To quote such extracts out of context may be a cheap shot, but it does illustrate sharply the difficulty of making the debt to Sterne seem convincing. While Wheeler's observations could apply to any number of Sterne's contemporaries, there is also the difficulty of deciding what might be distinctly Sternean when he also appropriated material from an assortment of texts in circulation. For example, Will Noonan considers Sterne's 'typographical play' (155) as an influence upon Alfred Jarry's *Gestes et opinions du Docteur Faustroll, Pataphysicien* (1898); but such play was not confined to Sterne alone, as Janine Barchas' *Graphic Design* (2003) has ably shown. At times, the appearance of competing sources makes it difficult to establish a

clear relationship of influence. Noonan acknowledges that Jarry's title could have been inspired by Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (149), while Wheeler recognizes that Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) was 'a favourite of Melville's' just as it was for Sterne (132).

Such criticisms may seem a little uncharitable considering the originality and sheer breadth of this collection. Noonan's claim—that there has been 'surprisingly little critical attention' given to his main proposition (143)—could equally apply to the other essays. Just as the popularity of Sterne threatened to exhaust critical debate, this collection offers new ways of understanding the influence of *Tristram Shandy*. While locating traces of Sterne in some surprising places, it also offers fresh lines of enquiry. I particularly enjoyed Noonan's sketch of the French perception of English humour in the nineteenth and twentieth century (146). Their need for a dictionary definition of 'humour anglais' brings me back nicely to my first point.