Music and Rhetoric in Tristram Shandy:
Challenging Eighteenth-Century Rational Intellectualism

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English 513: Comedy and Satire in Eighteenth Century Literature

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9 December 1997
Does Laurence Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy dramatize John Locke’s epistemology in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, as some critics have suggested? Locke’s associationalism, the concept that ideas develop in a pattern of internal relationships, seems a likely influence on Sterne’s digressive, almost “stream-of-consciousness,” narrative style. Certainly other facets of Locke’s argument must be weighed before we can consider Tristram Shandy a “dramatization,” however. Locke’s argument focuses upon the individual nature of human ideas, suggesting the possibility of solipsistic self-absorption. If cogito ergo sum depicts an individual human’s perception of place in the universe, and tabula rasa depicts the state of every individual human’s approach to that universe, insular thinking must necessarily occur. Locke suggests that humans tend toward solipsistic thinking because he considers human understanding of external reality to emerge as a function of one’s ability to reason as a rational human being. Locke’s argument relies on the rational nature of humans to avoid solipsistic internalization of external reality. He believed that humans could discipline themselves to remain grounded in a sense of external reality by engaging in rational discourse with others. Locke suggested that rational discourse become a common meeting ground in which humans, who naturally tended to internalize and become solipsistic, could communicate with one another to escape their highly internalized perception of the universe.

Eighteenth-century authors believed the long-term effect of highly internalized thinking to produce insanity. Many developed characters to highlight the dangers of solipsism. Tobias Smollett wrote Humphrey Clinker in part to demonstrate the importance of opening one’s eyes to the external world, illustrating this in the constructive lessons learned by Matthew Bramble. Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas demonstrates the dangers of solipsistic thinking in the hermit and the

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1 I do not intend to expand this discussion of Locke’s essay within the context of this paper, although the subject certainly warrants further critical reading.
astronomer; both characters “cure” their self-absorbed perceptions of the universe by conversing
with others, joining the larger external society outside of their own minds. Locke’s essay, and his
solution for the problem of solipsism, surely influenced these and other eighteenth-century
authors.

Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and particularly the concept of
associationalism, may have provided Sterne a narrative model for the novel. Sterne, however,
mistrusts humans to discipline themselves sufficiently to avoid solipsism. To Sterne, solipsism
reflected the normal human condition: humans characteristically perceive the universe as self-
absorbed individuals. He furthermore considered using rational discourse an unreliable discipline
with which to achieve understanding between solipsistic individuals. Tristram Shandy provides a
cast of solipsistic characters who attempt to meet and understand one another using rational
discourse, but continually fail to communicate. Sterne suggests that true understanding between
humans must occur in some other realm of human experience besides the rational. By providing
countless references to music and classical rhetoric, he hints that such modes may indicate the
most effective domain in which understanding may take place. Tristram Shandy demonstrates that
communication between individuals seldom occurs within the linear restrictions of rational
discourse. Rather, Sterne uses the affective functions of music and classical rhetoric to suggest that
true communication between individuals occurs in a non-rational domain.

Sterne uses the term “hobbyhorse” to indicate an individual character’s solipsistic
tendencies. The novel’s main characters attempt to communicate with others within the context of
their own hobbyhorses, but because each character practices a different hobbyhorse, no two
characters achieve any real progress in communicating. Each character’s hobbyhorse often

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2 The exceptions, of course, are Uncle Toby and Trim, who share the same hobbyhorse. If one is lucky enough to share a
hobbyhorse with another individual, communication within the topic of the obsession can and does occur.
retards, sometimes disallows, rational discourse as an effective method for communication—even when “rational discourse” is one’s hobbyhorse, as in Walter Shandy’s case. Examining each character’s hobbyhorse will expose ways in which it retards effective rational communication, suggesting that communication may better occur in a non-rational domain.

Walter Shandy’s obsession is rational discourse. No matter the occasion or conversation topic, Walter turns to rational discourse to understand and explain the events occurring around him. While awaiting Dr. Slop’s arrival, Walter calmly and rationally endeavors to explain the right and wrong end of a woman to his brother Toby. To do so, Walter first calls upon past authority to develop a rational argument. “‘It is said in Aristotle’s Master-Piece, ‘That when a man doth think of anything which is past,——he looketh down upon the ground;——but that when he thinketh of something that is to come, he looketh up towards the heavens’” (II.7.121). He then engages in a rational treatise, laying forth logical propositions and developing his argument. “Now, if a man was to sit down coolly, and consider within himself the make, the shape, the construction, come-at-ability, and convenience of all the parts which constitute the whole of that animal, called Woman, and compare them analogically…” (II.7.122). Ironically, he never finishes this treatise, just as he seldom makes his brother understand any of his arguments. Walter Shandy uses rational discourse to explain his aversion to the name Tristram, to explicate the significance of noses and to overcome his depression at Tristram’s crushed nose, to develop a written “encyclopedia” of useful knowledge for his son Tristram, to combat his sorrow at Bobby’s death, and even to define his pattern of sexual relations with his wife.

Uncle Toby and Trim share their hobbyhorse—armaments, battles, and their war wounds. They convert the bowling green into a series of miniature towns under siege, first to explain how

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1 All passages from the novel are quoted from the Penguin edition, edited by Graham Petrie, unless otherwise indicated. Citations indicate volume, chapter, and page number.
Uncle Toby received his wound at the Battle of Namur in concrete terms, then to follow the course of battles reported in the papers. Uncle Toby and Trim converse effectively with one another in terms of their hobbyhorse, but their attempts to explain abstract concepts and ideas to others using the concrete miniatures in the bowling green often evoke frustration, misunderstanding, and even anger from their listeners. When told that Dr Slop “is busy, an’ please your honour,...in making a bridge,” Uncle Toby assumes that Dr Slop is a building bridge for his battlements and sends him his “humble services” with Trim, saying, “I thank him heartily” (III.23.215). Of course, the “bridge” refers to an artificial device for Tristram’s crushed nose, but Uncle Toby cannot escape his “hobbyhorsical” worldview. In the same way, when Widow Wadman asks Uncle Toby, “And whereabouts, dear Sir,...did you receive this sad blow?” he guides her hand to the location on the map, not to the spot on his body (IX.26.607). Neither Uncle Toby nor Trim fully understands others unless the topic includes battles and warfare; otherwise they both interpret their external surrounding in terms of their internal hobbyhorses. So self-absorbed is Uncle Toby that Tristram Shandy claims to portray Uncle Toby “hobbyhorsically” by means of his obsession. Max Byrd, author of the Unwin Critical Library’s volume Tristram Shandy, believes that Sterne’s portrayal of Uncle Toby “by means hobbyhorsical” suggests that the way to “know” a character is not through reason or “reason’s instruments,” but by the person’s non-rational parts. The reader therefore knows Toby “by means of his own irrational, sympathetic progression” (93). In a sense, defining character by one’s non-rational parts describes the greater part of the novel’s dialog.

Dr Slop relies on Catholicism and modern science to relate with others. As a result, he can hardly escape good-natured ribbing at the hands of Walter, Yorick, and Uncle Toby for his

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1 Of course, this is a double misunderstanding. Toby points to the map, but Widow Wadman expected Toby “to lay his forefinger upon the place,” not to guide her own finger. This misunderstanding surely embarrassed Widow Wadman more than Toby.
“papist” beliefs. When Dr Slop cuts his thumb, Walter Shandy goads him into reading aloud the curse of Ernulphus the Bishop. Unwilling to admit the absurdity of so drastic a curse, one used for excommunication, Dr Slop reads it aloud. True to his hobbyhorse, Slop claims the curse not “too violent for a cut of the thumb” (II.10.182). Dr Slop uses his modern forceps to extract young Tristram from his mother’s womb, the direct result of which is Tristram’s damaged nose—an outcome Walter, expert on noses, greatly feared. Walter and Dr Slop share their hobbyhorse of modern science, explaining Dr Slop’s presence at Tristram’s birth in addition to a midwife. Indeed, Walter brings Dr Slop into the birth because he fancies Dr Slop’s forceps and agrees with Dr Slop that a cesarean section would be a capital means of birthing a child.

Of all men in the world, Dr Slop was the fittest for my father’s purpose;——for though his new-invented forceps was the armour he had proved, and what he maintained, to be the safest instrument for deliverance,——yet, it seems, he had scattered a word or two in his book, in favour of the very thing [the cesarean section] which ran in my father’s fancy...(II.19.167).

Their interest in the cesarean section best illustrates their mutual solipsism, for such an operation in the eighteenth century meant near certain death, not to mention mortal pain and agony, for the non-anaesthetized woman. Walter Shandy, in his self-absorbed reality, never grasps this fact: “He mentioned the thing to my mother;——merely as a matter of fact; but seeing her turn as pale as ashes at the very mention of it, as much as the operation flattered his hopes,—he thought it well to say no more of it,—” (II.19.166). Dr Slop remains isolated from all other characters in his fanatical “papistry” and from all but Walter Shandy in his belief in modern science.

Several minor characters in the novel display their solipsistic hobbyhorses in isolated instances. Susannah reveals one of her hobbyhorses when she hears of Bobby’s death from Obadiah. News of the death brings to Susannah’s mind her mistress’s green satin nightgown. She then thinks about how Bobby’s death might “be the death” of Mrs. Shandy, which then leads her to consider the future of her entire mistress’s wardrobe (V.7.356-7). Mrs. Shandy has her own
solipsistic obsession, one for which she can hardly be blamed. The first and last chapters of the novel contain a scene in which Mrs. Shandy asks a question at the worst possible time. In Volume I, chapter one, in the middle of copulating with her husband, she asks if the clock has been wound. In Volume IX, chapter thirty-three, in the middle of Obadiah’s story about the bull, she asks what kind of story is being told. In both instances, her ill-timed question destroys a creative process. In the first instance, her question ends lovemaking, while in the last instance, her question ends both O badiah’s story and the novel as a whole. She lacks understanding, perhaps not atypical of eighteenth-century women, but she remains solipsistically ignorant of her ignorance, retarding any possible attempts to communicate with her.

Tristram Shandy, the novel’s narrator, also has his hobbyhorse—writing the novel itself, an act of almost sexual procreation. As Sterne’s health degenerated in real life, he depicted Tristram struggling to continue writing his life and opinions, even fleeing death through France in the process. All of the novel’s digressions suggest a mind trying to fit too much material into so limited a space, struggling to include all of the connections that occur in Tristram’s mind. Neither Sterne nor Tristram Shandy have room in the novel for anything but the novel—even death must wait to take him away until Tristram finishes it.

If Tristram Shandy remains solipsistic, as I maintain he does, it would be ridiculous for me to assert that he is unable to communicate effectively with his audience. In fact, he maintains effective communication with his audience throughout the novel, as do several of the other characters. None of these characters, however, practice rational discourse to communicate themselves effectively to others. As one example, Trim most effectively communicates with body language and a gesture, the dropping of his hat. His first effective act of communication emerges while preparing to read Yorick’s sermon in Volume II. Trim affects a strikingly eloquent pose, after which he “laid his hand upon his heart, and made an humble bow to his master;----then
laying down his hat upon the floor, and taking up the sermon in his left hand, in order to have the right at his liberty,—he advanced, nothing doubting, into the middle of the room, where he could best see, and best be seen by, his audience” (II.15.137). Trim’s listeners, and we the readers, may find more meaning in Trim’s posture and gestures than in the often-interrupted and fragmented sermon he reads. In the same way, Walter’s immediate reaction upon hearing of his son’s mutilated nose, before he begins a philosophical discourse on the subject, communicates more than his words.

The moment my father got up into his chamber, he threw himself prostrate across his bed in the wildest disorder imaginable, but at the same time, in the most lamentable attitude of a man borne down with sorrows, that ever the eye of pity dropp’d a tear for. —– The palm of his right hand, as he fell upon the bed, receiving his forehead, and covering the greatest part of both his eyes, gently sunk down with his head (his elbow giving way backwards) till his nose touch’d the quilt; —– his left arm hung insensible over the side of the bed, his knuckles reclining upon the handle of the chamber pot, which peep’d out beyond the valance, —– his right leg (his left being drawn up towards his body) hung half over the side of the bed, the edge of it pressing upon his shin bone. —– He felt it not. A fix’d, inflexible sorrow took possession of every line of his face. — He sigh’d once, — heaved his breast often, — but utter’d not a word (III.29.223).

Once he resumes speaking, we hear the absurd tale of Slawkenbergius along with other “expert” opinions on the subject by “ancient” and venerable authorities like Bruscambille and Prignitz, Paraeus and Bouchet. Mr. Shandy’s posture on the bed communicates more of his feelings about Tristram’s crushed nose than any of the discourse informed by his rational reliance on “experts.” Tristram Shandy conveys more to us about human thought in his digressions and obsessions—with whiskers, noses, hobbyhorses, and sex—than with his logical narrative. Laurence Sterne rejects Locke’s assertions that rational discourse is the means by which humans effectively communicate. As Ross King states, “Almost all of the speech acts in the text—vows, christenings, curses, contracts—are subject to some sort of ‘unsatisfactoriness’ which reveals the inefficacy of the speaker, of the performative words, or perhaps more broadly, of the empowering institutions
themsevles” (299). Sterne’s characters suggest that communication best occurs in the affective domain. I submit that Sterne turns to classical rhetoric and music to communicate in this affective, non-rational domain.

Classical rhetoric and music appeal to human emotions more convincingly than the written or spoken word alone. Originally, rhetoric referred to an appeal to the emotions meant to persuade a listener.

The most basic ideas of rhetoric, Aristotle’s premises, are two: first, it is the faculty of discerning in every case the available means of persuasion. It is the neutral art, indifferent to subject or attitude. Secondly, the assumptions of its reasoning are concerned with probable human reaction. This is its distinction from dialectic, the discovery of near-necessary connection, regardless of the respondent (Traugott 1954, 87).

“Probable human reaction” refers to outward signs of inner emotions, upon which rhetoric functions. Originally, the dense catalogs of rhetorical devices were meant, not as an academic exercise, but as strategies for influencing the emotions of listeners. Music’s influences on the emotions were also well known to the Greeks, who discussed cathartic expression or purging of the emotions through musical and dramatic performances. The Medieval Church prescribed very specific guidelines for Church music, including a restriction on wordless music, because of music’s effect on the emotions of its listeners (Betts 58). Much later, early German romantics like Tieck and Hoffman distinguished between speech and music: “Speech merely reckons, names, and describes in a foreign material the ‘mysterious stream in the depths of the human spirit.’ Only music ‘streams it out before us as it is in itself.’ And only music ‘reduces the most manifold and most contradictory movements of our soul to the same beautiful harmonies’” (Freedman 3). German romantics and French symbolists considered music “the language of the passions in its purest form,” a fact that Sterne seemed to recognize nearly a century earlier (8).
Since music and rhetoric both appeal to the emotions, one might expect to find a strong relationship between the two. Indeed, as early as Aristotle, philosophers and theorists recognized the concord of music and rhetoric in their affective uses (Betts 22). Aristotle and Isocrates both considered “the end of musical training as the improvement of oratory” (27), while Quintilian recognized the affective qualities of pitch and rhythm in voice and music (29). The early Church recognized the affective power of music through parallels with rhetoric: just as anything other than bare skeletal words in rhetoric indicated ornamentation designed to affect or persuade its listeners, so anything other than simple chant music must have indicated ornamentation designed to affect or persuade the listener (58). More formal and academic paralleling of music and rhetoric emerged in 1606 with the publication of Joachim Burmeister’s Musica Poetica, a scholarly study written to demonstrate similarities between musical figures and figures of speech (96-8). By the time Sterne published the first two volumes of Tristram Shandy in 1760, clear parallels between music and rhetoric’s affective influence were established. Freedman suggests that Sterne recognized the link between music and rhetoric and wrote to achieve “the transmutation of musical rhetoric, principles, and structure to literature” (6).

Sterne uses music in the novel to suggest an alternative to Locke’s rational discourse, an affective model of communication. Perhaps the most pervasive example of such musical communication emerges in Uncle Toby’s whistled “Lillabullero.” Sterne admits that Uncle Toby’s whistling both answers an argument and expresses his feelings on the subject under discussion.

My uncle Toby would never offer to answer this by any other kind of argument, than that of whistling half a dozen bars of Lillabullero.----You must know it was the usual channel through which his passions got vent, when anything shocked or surprised him;---but especially when any thing, which he deemed very absurd, was offered (I.21.92).

Uncle Toby’s whistling “Lillabullero” communicates his passions to those surrounding him—and particularly to us as readers, who now recognize the whistled tune as a code for his feelings. But
more significantly, in terms of music’s communicative power, Uncle Toby’s whistling “Lillabullero”
also acts as part of a rhetorical argument, which Tristram Shandy attempts to name using
“traditional” terms of rhetoric.

As not one of our logical writers, nor any of the commentators upon them, that I remember, have thought proper to give a name to this particular species of argument,—I here take the liberty to do it myself.... I do therefore, by these presents, strictly order and command, That it be known and distinguished by the name and title of Argumentum Fistulatorium [argument of the reed-pipe player], and no other;— (I.21.93).

Sterne accomplishes several satiric jabs in these passages against the style of “logical writers” and “commentators upon them,” while also suggesting, albeit humorously, that Uncle Toby’s whistling be considered as valid an argument as any other rhetorical device used by any other orator. Sterne suggests in the whistled tune that communication can occur through affective music as effectively, if not more so, than in “logical” and established oratory.

Rational communication often fails because of the linear nature of the spoken or written word with which a speaker or writer attempts to convey the simultaneity of conversational speaking. Music provides a more effective means of communicating simultaneity through harmonious, or even discordant, musical parts. As a musical performance may include polyphonic or even symphonic sound with many different musical parts, so a rhetorical argument between several parties may include simultaneous lines of conversation. Sterne uses a musical model to communicate such simultaneous (polyphonic) arguments to us readers, providing a more accurate (and more accurately communicated) image of the scene. The most remarkable of these instances occurs in Volume III. As Dr Slop begins to recite the curse of Bishop Ernulphus, Uncle Toby whistles “Lillabullero as loud as he could, all the time” (III.10.182). He continues whistling
“under” Dr Slop’s voice through the next chapter “whistling Lillabullero, though not quite as loudly as before” (III.11.185). Under his breath, as it were, Uncle Toby also manages to interject remarks and extraneous whistling (“W hew—w—w—”) sounds, suggesting simultaneous rhetorical arguments. Sterne uses a musical model and Uncle Toby’s Argumentum Fistulatorium to suggest music’s ability to effectively communicate simultaneous lines of argument.

Pitch and tone, the elements of musical sound, also effectively communicate affective reality. Sterne uses Phutatorius’s incident with the chestnut to suggest this means of communication. In this incident, the sound Phutatorius makes when a hot chestnut lands in his lap communicates considerably more than the words uttered...in this case, the curse on Christ’s wounds, “Zounds!”

The musical tone of Phutatorius’ exclamation puzzles its audience, for it communicated nothing of the conversation’s topic, one of Yorick’s sermons. The exclamation perfectly well communicated Phutatorius’ pain, of which none were aware but him for several moments. Sterne suggests that the tone and key of the word, and not the word itself, communicate the individual’s inner self effectively. Although a humorous example, few passages from the text so clearly highlight Sterne’s belief in the communicative power of music in an affective domain.

1 Formal language has difficulty conveying such simultaneity. By “under” I mean in the sense that two things can be happening at the same time on different levels, like the different notes of a musical chord played simultaneously.
Further evidence of Sterne's belief can be found in Shandy's perusal of Yorick's sermons (which, we know, are actually Sterne's sermons). In a stack of Yorick's sermons, Shandy finds penciled commentary on the back of each. The first bundles he finds contain the words “moderato” and “so-so,” seemingly to indicate mediocre quality. “Moderato” sermons he finds bundled with “so-so” sermons, as if Yorick meant the terms synonymously (moderato Italian for “moderate,” as in “average”). However, Shandy finds many of the “moderato” sermons superior in quality to the “so-so” sermons, suggesting an alternative meaning for the term. At this point, Shandy finds more sermons, these with musical notations on the back, suggesting that “moderato” refers to musical style rather than quality.

What Yorick could mean by the words lentamente,---tenutè,---grave,---and sometimes adagio,---as applied to theological compositions, and with which he has characterized some of these sermons, I dare not venture to guess. I am more puzzled still upon finding a l'octova alta! upon one;---Con strepito upon the back of another;---Siciliana upon a third;---Alla capella upon a fourth;---Con l'arco upon this;---Senza l’arco upon that.---All I know is, that they are musical terms, and have a meaning;---and as he was a musical man, I will make no doubt, but that by some quaint application of such metaphors to the compositions in hand, they impressed very distinct ideas of their several characters upon his fancy,---whatever they may do upon others (VI.11.414).

Sterne's use of musical styles to represent oratorical or rhetorical styles suggests that Sterne recognized the strong connection between music and rhetoric. It also reveals the importance of how a sermon or speech is performed, rendering the words themselves less meaningful than their affect on the audience's “fancy,” the affective domain.

Sterne also indicates that the proper musical “key” provides sense and meaning to a story when told aloud, suggesting that musical pitch and tone convey as much meaning as the words with which the story is told. First, corporal Trim sets out to tell “The Story of the king of Bohemia and

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1 Lentamente means "in a slow manner.” Tenutè means “in a manner so as to hold a tone or chord to its full value.” Grave means "slowly and solemnly.” Adagio means “in an easy graceful manner, slowly.” L'octova alta means “in a higher octave.” Con strepito means “with a rustle, a rattle, a clatter.” Siciliana I was unable to define. Alla capella means “in the chapel.” Con l’arco means
his seven castles.” To begin the tale, Trim, “having hemmed twice, to find in what key his story would best go, and best suit his master’s humour—he exchanged a single look of kindness with him, and set off thus” (VIII.19.534). The significance of hemming to find the proper keys is two-fold: he attempts to find the proper tone to suit his master’s “humor” and compliment Uncle Toby’s emotional state, while the “key” of the story becomes more important than the words, since he never finishes the tale. In a second instance highlighting the importance of musical key to a story, we return to Trim telling a story, this time about his brother Tom. Uncle Toby interrupts Trim so often that Trim loses the story’s “key,” a problem he finds most troublesome.

The corporal returned to his story, and went on,—but with an embarrassment in doing it, which here and there a reader in this world will not be able to comprehend; for by the sudden transitions all along, from one kind and cordial passion to another, in getting thus far on his way, he had lost the sportable key of his voice which gave sense and spirit to his tale;...the corporal got as near the note as he could; and in that attitude, continued his story (IX.6.579).

It is Trim’s key and note that “gave spirit and sense to the tale,” not the words themselves. Sterne indicates the importance of music in communication, for tone and pitch influence the affective and non-rational domain of the human experience.

One of Sterne’s metaphors for writing this novel returns to the theme of music. In Volume IV, Tristram defends his choice of cutting out a scene from the novel, then makes a statement about his method of writing: “For my own part, I am but just set up in the business, so know little about it [writing a novel]—but, in my opinion, to write a book is for all the word like humming a song—be but in tune with yourself, Madam, ‘tis no matter how high or how low you take it” (IV.25.313). Sterne follows this statement with an anecdote in which Doctor Homenas asks Tristram to look over his sermon notes, which he does by humming them, commenting on modulation and tune, then suddenly reaching a point in the text/music in which he finds himself

“with the bow.” Senza l’arco means “without the bow.” Definitions from Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary and Cassell’s
“flying into the other world” (IV.25.313). Sterne indicates that the musical nature of performed text can transport a reader or listener into another world altogether—perhaps a reference to the affective domain over which music and rhetoric hold influence. That Sterne would consider writing a novel like humming a song provides ample evidence of his conception of music as an effective mode of communication.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of music’s superior ability to communicate between humans emerges from William Freedman’s book, Laurence Sterne and the Origins of the Musical Novel. Freedman suggests that Sterne chose to structure the novel with a musical, not a narrative, pattern. He traces Sterne’s interest in and knowledge of music to his experience as a cello (viola da gamba) player, and suggests that Sterne’s treatment of time and Lockean associationalism coincide with his interest in music as a means for evoking emotions. He writes that “the mark of the musical novel is, naturally enough, music; and the aim is not to halt time in patterns of imagery, but somehow to reproduce its insistent flow in moving patterns of narrative, memory, and thought” (13). Freedman then summarizes his argument by suggesting when a lyrical novel will take a “distinctly musical turn.”

(1) [W]hen it is preoccupied with either or both of the principal problems of time—simultaneity and evanescence; (2) when its forms or subject matter include the various movements and patterns of consciousness paralleled by the patterns of musical motion: counterpoint, theme and variation, thematic development, repetition, and so on; (3) when it is no less concerned with apprehension than comprehension and strives for an evocation of feelings and effects traditionally associated with music: ineffability, evanescence and rapid change, harmoniousness, and so on; (4) when its effort, as in Hesse, Tieck, and Sterne, is to bring aesthetic harmony out of the multiple vacillations, dissonances, and contradictions of human activity, thought, and feeling (13).

Freedman submits the novel to careful and thorough scrutiny and determines that Sterne’s narrative pattern is really a musical pattern, complete with themes, variations on those themes,
musical counterpoint, and numerous references to music itself within the text. Although Freedman’s ideas have not captured wide recognition or acceptance, other authors briefly suggest similar possibilities. Jean-Jacques Mayoux claims that “it is difficult to ignore Sterne’s own musical images, which go so well with the musical aspects of his genius” (579), while John Traugott offers the idea that Sterne’s paradox and communication demand fulfillment of the form, just as an unresolved musical chord demands fulfillment (Traugott 1954, 96). The idea that Sterne might have chosen a musical rather than narrative pattern to communicate the entire novel to his readers convincingly supports Sterne’s rejection of rational discourse as an effective means of communication between individuals.

Music is not the only means by which Sterne suggests affective communication can occur. Classical rhetoric, originally meant to influence the listener’s emotions, plays a significant role in the text. Sterne includes many classical terms of rhetoric in the novel, perhaps to convey his belief that logical dialectic, or rational discourse, cannot possibly communicate human passions effectively. Graham Petrie identifies and catalogs the many different rhetorical devices to which Sterne refers by name in the text.

There are over twenty specific references to rhetoric, oratory and rhetorical terms in the course of Tristram Shandy. The most frequent are those concerning oratory, and these refer almost invariably to Walter Shandy, with the exception of two which deal with Trim’s attitude as he reads the sermon (II, xvii, 122), and once concerning Dr Slop (III, xiv, 185-186). A postrophe and Aposiopesis are also frequently mentioned (II, iv, 91; II, vi, 100; IV, xxvii, 322, VI, xxii, 445, IX, xxvi 683). And there are individual references to rhetoric itself (VI, ii, 411) and rhetoricians (VIII, xxxiii, 587), and to Epiphonema (I, xix, 55), Erotesis (I, xix, 55), Sorites (II, xiv, 146), Axiom (IV, xxvii, 319), Catachresis (V, I, 343), Parenthesis (V, xvi, 373), Exclamation (V, xxxiii, 394), Hypallage (VIII, xiii, 552), Prolepsis (IX, xxxiii, 645), and Periphrasis (IX, xxxiii, 645), all of them used as explicitly rhetorical terms (Petrie 480).  

1. The references in this quotation to the text of Tristram Shandy are to the edition of James A. Work (New York, 1940).

4. Petrie defines some of these terms, while others can be found in good dictionaries. All references to Peacham in the following definitions refer to Garden of Eloquence (1577); references to Holmes refer to The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy (1739). All other definitions come from Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary unless otherwise indicated.

1. Apostrophe: “Address or turning aside” (Holmes 47).
Sterne obviously satirizes Walter Shandy’s use of rhetorical devices, but the purpose to which he uses them becomes the more focused target of his attack. Walter Shandy does not use these devices to influence the emotions of the speaker, but to demonstrate his mastery of the rhetorical figures themselves as an exercise in oratory. This satire returns to Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding, to which Sterne alludes early in the novel (I.4.39). Traugott indicates that Sterne believed Locke had lost sight of “the passions” in his theories, so that logic or reason as moral art became distinguished from classical rhetoric (Traugott 1954, 81-2). Walter Shandy subverts the original intention of rhetoric from its basis in the affective domain to support his penchant for logical figures and rational dialectic. Sterne’s use of music as rhetoric, as indicated in previous examples, highlights his belief that rhetoric should remain connected to its origins in the affective domain of human experience.

Classical rhetoric of an affective nature seems lost in the text, unless we return to Trim’s pathos-inducing eloquence in the kitchen at Bobby’s death. Obadiah reports the news of Bobby’s death to the kitchen staff, but Trim attempts to place the matter in perspective. “Are we not here now, continued the corporal, (striking the end of his stick perpendicularly upon the floor, so as to give the idea of health and stability)—and are we not—(dropping his hat upon the ground) gone! in a moment!—’Twas infinitely striking!” (V.7.356). Trim’s verbal eloquence is totally surpassed by his

2. Aposiopesis: “Suppression” (Holmes 46). “...when through some affection, as of feare, anger, sorrow, bashfulness, and such like, we breake off our speech, before it be all ended” (Peacham N’).
3. Epiphenomena: “Acclamation” (Holmes 56). “an acclamation of a mater vittered or approved, conteyning the summe and conclusion thereof...” (Peacham L’).
4. Erotesis: rhetorical question
5. Sorites: an argument consisting of propositions so arranged that the predicate of any one forms the subject of the next and the conclusion unites the subject of the first proposition with the predicate of the last.
6. Axiom: a statement accepted as true as the basis for argument or inference.
7. Catachresis: use of a forced and esp. paradoxical figure of speech (as blind mouths).
8. Parenthesis: “when a sence is cast betweene the speache before it be all ended, whiche although it give some strength, yet when it is taken away, it leaueth the speech perfect inough” (Peacham F’). Webster’s: a remark or passage that departs from the theme of a discourse: digression.
9. Exclamation: vehement expression of protest or complaint
10. Hyeallage: Shifting the application of words [from “Silva Rhetoricae” (http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.html)].
11. Prolepsis: the application of an adjective to a noun in anticipation of the result of the verb.
rhetorical flourish of stick and hat. Tristram Shandy begins an apostrophe to the reader several paragraphs later in which he portrays the rational Lockeian use of rhetoric as its own form of solipsistic self-absorption: "Ye who govern this mighty world and its mighty concerns with the engines of eloquence,—who heat it, and cool it, and melt it, and mollify it,—and then harden it again to your purpose—...—meditate—meditate, I beseech you, upon Trim's hat" (V.7.357). The "engines of eloquence" refer to the devices of rhetoric, the figures Walter so rationally and frequently parades before his listeners. Sterne emphasizes the misuse of rhetoric—heating, cooling, melting, mollification—in which he believed Renaissance and eighteenth-century rhetoricians had engaged. Sterne's personal library contained only two eighteenth-century titles on rhetoric—Holmes' catalog of rhetorical devices entitled The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy (1739) and Sheridan's A Course of Lectures on Elocution (1763). He owned none of the lists and definitions characteristic of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century manuals on rhetoric, seeming to prefer the classical works on rhetoric by Aristotle, Quintilian, and Cicero (Petrie 481-2). Renaissance manuals of rhetoric, along with Holmes' tome, listed hundreds of arcane rhetorical figures without suggesting a proper style for practicing the art of rhetoric, as if to suggest that simply understanding the terms might make one's speech more influential. It is this practice that Walter Shandy's knowledge of rhetoric satirizes, that Locke's rational discourse suggests, and that Sterne finds ridiculous when compared to the affective art of classical rhetoric practiced in Trim's gestures and Yorick's musical labels to describe oral performances.

The affective nature of music and classical rhetoric are two important components of Sterne's argument against Locke's proposing rational discourse as a means for overcoming solipsistic self-absorption. Music and rhetoric appeal to the emotions, sharing a common purpose and even certain figures. Language has tonality and rhythm, both important aspects of music,

which play a significant role in the affective experiences of language (Katz 146). Bacon goes so far as to suggest, in Advancement of Learning and Sylva Sylvarum, that tropes in music are parallel to tropes in rhetoric (Betts 175). Sterne’s argument against Locke’s rational discourse as an effective means of communication includes many other non-rational aspects of communication besides music and rhetoric, including gestures (as mentioned above), facial expressions, and even stream-of-consciousness narrative structure. Tristram Shandy does not so much dramatize Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding as illustrate alternative solutions to the problem of overcoming human nature’s tendency toward solipsistic self-absorption.
Bibliography


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