Tristram Shandy and the Irish: An Ancestry of the 'Odd'

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*S*amuel Johnson's famous dismissal of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* ("Nothing odd will do long. *Tristram Shandy* did not last."[1]), may be one of the most short-sighted critical claims in literary history. After all, Sterne's novel has been variously, and repeatedly, cited as a major influence on Modernism and Postmodernism[2], as a forerunner to the major metafictional texts of the twentieth century, and Calvino's claim that *Tristram Shandy* is the "undoubted progenitor of all avant-garde novels of our century," (ctd.in "Laurence Sterne", *The Guardian*) too bears testament to its overwhelming significance for 20th literature. Furthermore, the influence of Sterne's novel continues to be felt in some of the dominant contemporary cultural art forms: It has been successfully adapted by Michael Winterbottom as *A Cock and Bull Story* (2005), a film about the making of a film adaptation of *Tristram Shandy*, and Martin Rowson's major graphic novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* was published to critical acclaim in 1996. Within Sterne studies, too, new editions of *Tristram Shandy* appear almost annually, and there continues to be an enormous outpouring of innovative critical work on Sterne, and on his most famous work. Since the turn of the millennium there have been numerous studies of Sterne published: Thomas Keymer's *Sterne, The Moderns, and the Novel* (2002), Peter de Voogd and John Neubauer's *The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe* (2004), and W. B. Gerard's *Laurence Sterne and the Visual Imagination* (2006) appeared

in quick succession and, more recently, two edited collections on Sterne's work have been published: *Tristram Shandy*: *the Oxford Casebook* (2006) and the *Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne* (2009), both edited by Keymer. In addition, *The Shandean*, an annual dedicated to *Tristram Shandy*, and edited by de Voogd, was established in 1989 and continues to publish significant critical essays on Sterne's work. Furthermore, Mary-Céline Newbould's forthcoming study of the influence of Sterne on various artistic media forms in the late 18th century, *Adaptations of Laurence Sterne's Fiction: Sterneana 1760-1840* (2014), promises to explore the prevalence of adaptation within the 18th century, and apparently foregrounds Sterne's prominent contribution to cultural interactivity in the period, a focus that has strong resonance for contemporary culture. In addition, a Chinese translation of *Tristram Shandy*, edited by Ying Lao Lun was published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House in 2012, emphasizing the transnational reach of the novel. It would appear, after all, that Johnson may have misread the impact of Sterne's novel.

However, Johnson's misapprehension of the significance of Sterne's work very likely arose because his literary-critical framing rationale emerged from his acute sense of a strong, if still emergent, tradition of realism in the 18th Century English novel, a tradition, as we shall see, that increasingly appears to have been an inappropriate model for Sterne's masterpiece. This essay will present a case that it is precisely *Tristram Shandy*'s perceived 'oddness' that has ensured its place both in an alternative novelistic tradition in Europe and within the anti-realist tradition in the history of Irish writing; this has, of course, ramifications for the frequently-narrow critical frame that has been used to define the development of the novel. A strictly English realist model obscures far more than it reveals, particularly in the case of novels that appear marginal or 'odd'.

Nevertheless, it remains critically important to offer closer examination of the English literary context in which *Tristram Shandy* emerged, to assess the validity of the perception of *Tristram Shandy* as a literary-historical aberration. Christina Lupton, for example, has recently pointed to a growing consensus among 18th century scholars that many novels from the 1750s, that predated Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, were "quirky and self-reflexive in ways that the celebration of realist fiction has eclipsed" (289). She specifically mentions texts like the anonymously-authored *Charlotte Summers, the Fortunate Parish Girl* (1750), Francis Coventry's *Pompey the Little*: or, *The Life and Adventures of a Lapdog* (1751), and John

Kidgell's *The Card* (1755), both in the context of their material experimentation with title pages and inserted illustrations – their overt awareness of the book itself as a cultural material form – and for the "characterized narrators that anticipate *Tristram* Shandy" (289). Lupton argues for the significance of the early novels primarily on these two levels. She asserts, in particular, that a prime example of the "quirky and self-reflexive" is Kidgell's *The Card* (1755), in which the narrator claims to have included a visual representation of the ten of clubs to increase the chances of his novel being more or less recycled back into usefulness:

The Card: By this artifice doth the Author ingeniously project a message to preserve himself from total oblivion; humbly conceiving, that when this neglected Treatise under the character of waste-paper, shall be doomed to share the Fate of it, some little Master or Miss may be kindly advertised of the picture of that harmless Card which adorns one happy leaf of it, and which began about the year one thousand Seven hundred and Fifty, to be universally respected as a high Messenger of Honour (Cited in Lupton 22).

The self-reflexivity is clear, as is the self-parody, the mock dismissal of the value of the book, and the playfulness with respect to the materiality of the book itself. Evident too is Sterne's anticipation, as Lupton has it, of the "techniques we now understand as self-conscious, cultivating the ability of the intrusive narrator to comment on his own devices and his readers, the interpolated narrative, explicit intertextuality, and a degree of narrative chaos that interferes with mimetic effect" (289). Lupton is certainly convincing in establishing a literary context for Sterne, although it is also worth remembering that the context remains, at best, a minority one that doesn't reflect the dominant literary tradition at the time, but she certainly situates Sterne's work against the backdrop of technically resonant antecedents. Thomas Keymer, in his *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel* (2002), also historically situates *Tristram Shandy* in the 1750s and 1760s, convincingly pointing to similarities with some minor precursors like the *Life and Memoirs of Mr. Ephraim Tristram Bates* (1756), and he too acknowledges the significance of Kidgell's *The Card*. However, Wayne Booth's attempt at contextualizing Sterne's novel arguably remains most persuasive, if not, ultimately, completely convincing. Reacting against the tendency to view *Tristram Shandy* as "a mad, inexplicable thing, unreasoned and unreasonable, having real kinship in literature only with other mad books, most of them long since wisely forgotten" (163), Booth argues

that "every form of intrusion in *Tristram Shandy* is, I think, available in Fielding's works" and suggests that Sterne's intrusive devices were "merely extensions of what everyone was borrowing from Fielding" (176). The *degree* to which Sterne uses the device of the intrusive narrator is, of course, far greater in terms of its disruptive impact, or in Booth's own words, "he has taken a device which in previous writers was subordinate to other ends and made it an end in itself" (185). Booth also claims that only *Captain Greenland*, by William Goodall made use of the *intrusive narrator* to the disruptive degree used by Sterne but he also concedes that Goodall's novel was far less successful, artistically, than *Tristram Shandy* because the device of the intrusive narrator never "becomes the central interest, the unifying factor," and thus never attains the unique, truly divergent narrative status of Sterne's novel (184-85). This is the crucial distinction and represents the point at which the novel form implicitly diverges from the essentially rhetorical purpose of the realist novel to the novel of play. It is reasonably accurate to situate *Tristram Shandy* in the context of the intrusive narrator that is part of the poetics of the 18th century novel but the degree to which it is employed, the extent of the assault on form, logic, reason, and the very possibility of the novel as a viable socially-energised text, is nowhere evident in the way it is in Sterne's novel; the fingerprints of his age were discernible but Sterne was also simultaneously writing in a less enclosed historically- and culturally-specific tradition.

Booth acknowledges that Sterne was influenced by several European authors who predate these early technical experiments from his immediate English context but the desire to rationalize *Tristram Shandy* in an English context is also central to the critic's activity, as it is with Lupton and Keymer who both aim to deflate the perception that it emerged primarily from a non-English context. The connections between Fielding, Goodall and Kidgell, and Sterne, certainly establish a meaningful artistic lineage but it is also very clear that the work of authors like Fielding, Defoe and Swift, had far more specific materialist concerns than the endlessly digressive and disruptive *Tristram Shandy*, and that the dominant fictional mode that was being already firmly established in the 18th century was far more rooted in socio-political engagement and realistic narrative models. For example, Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel*, argues,

… that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the time and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more referential use of language than is common in other literary forms. (32)

Watt's logic is easily demonstrable in many of the major novels in British history, and while the focus of the novel form has certainly diversified in the 20th Century, many contemporary British novels continue to fit Watt's understanding. And while Watt tried to accommodate Sterne within a realist tradition his efforts are, at best, generalized and speak primarily of Watt's desire to have the novel fit his model more than any genuinely convincing engagement with the depth of impact of Sterne's intrusive disruptions:

Sterne's narrative mode gives very careful attention to all the aspects of formal realism: to the particularization of time, place and person; to a natural and lifelike sequence of action; and to the creation of a literary style which gives the most exact verbal and rhythmical equivalent possible of the object. (291)

It can, of course, be argued that Sterne was parodying those very aspects of particularization that Watt values so highly as an attribute of the socially-engaged novel.

It is also evident that Sterne's great experiment extended itself so far beyond the immediate context that it developed into something that was ultimately quite different from the dominant tradition at the time, and thus deviates significantly from Watt's model. As Booth argues, *Tristram Shandy*'s intrusive narrator becomes its own primary fascination and is not ultimately at the service of some other social or political agenda, and this is a fundamental difference between the immediate English tradition and the obsessive self-conscious voice that fictionally devours itself to the degree that action becomes essentially impossible.

It is clear that *Tristram Shandy's* inheritance resonates more closely with a continental European tradition rather than with the immediate English one. If one situates the novel in an English context, one is forced into the manipulations evident in Watt or the partial family-resemblances claimed by Lupton and Booth. The logic to instead situate *Tristram Shandy* in a European tradition that includes the famous precursor, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and Sterne's contemporary, Denis Diderot's *Jacques la Fataliste*

1765-1780) is inviting. These texts, and others, may be considered among the earliest versions of the self-conscious textual works that later became dominant in twentieth-century literature, from the early modernist obsession with knowledge systems to classical postmodern examples of the self-conscious mode like Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1979) and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). But the historical trajectory may, in fact, be even deeper. Steven Moore, in his provocative work, *The Novel: An Alternative History* offers a different interpretation to that of the standard literary-historical model of the novel's development. Initially, he offers up a parodic summary of the standard trajectory of the development of the novel form:

The novel was born in the 18th-Century England, the offspring of a questionable marriage between fiction and non-fiction (Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* pretended to be true travel accounts), gained respectability with Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels named after prudish virgins (Pamela, Clarissa), sowed some wild oats (Fielding, Smollett, Sterne) and went through a goth phase (Walpole, Radcliffe, Mary Shelley) before settling down into domestic life (Austen) and becoming the preferred entertainment of the middle class … The novel matured during [the following decades], dramatizing the great moral issues of the day (Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy in England, Hugo, Flaubert, and Zola in France; Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Turgenev in Russia, Hawthorne, James and Dreiser in the United States) and providing trenchant social commentary. Things got a little out of hand in the 1920s and 1930s (Joyce's *Ulysses*, Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*) … (3)

In Moore's alternative lineage the origins of what we call the novel are traced back to the 4th Century BCE (Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*) and we are offered a deeper European context for Sterne than the standard histories of the English realist novel. Moore points to many similarities between *Tristram Shandy* and Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (variously dated 1483-1553) and Barthelemy Aneau's *Alector*'s, or *The Cock*'s (1560) "multi-layered narrative structure," in effect suggesting that the spirit of resistance to ordered narratives, and parodic unmaking of one's own narrative world, may in fact be a constant throughout literary history, rather than a simple reaction to eighteenth and nineteenth century realism.

Whatever about the ultimate merits of Moore's provocative thesis, a broader European context for Sterne does seem to offer a fruitful way to approach his work, and several non-English European writers have long

been convinced of this tradition as Sterne's rightful home. Milan Kundera's conception, for example, of a European novelistic tradition places Diderot and Sterne firmly at the very pinnacle of the novel's development, in the context of Cervantes's inheritance:

The appeal of play: Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Denis Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste* are for me the two greatest novelistic works of the eighteenth century, two novels conceived as grand games. They reach heights of playfulness, of lightness, never scaled before or since. Afterwards, the novel got itself tied to the imperative of verisimilitude, to realistic settings, to chronological order. It abandoned the possibilities opened up by these two masterpieces, which could have led to a different development of the novel (yes, it's possible to imagine a whole other history of the European novel. (15-16)

Notwithstanding Kundera's over-zealous declaration of the demise of the novel of play (the rich inheritance of the metafictional novel, after all, firmly defies his death-knell note), the establishment of an early European non-realist tradition is crucial, and interconnected trajectories are not difficult to discern. For example, the distinction between Sterne's and Diderot's work and the innate imperatives of realism is also evident in Joyce's interest in Sterne; according to Eugene Jolas, Joyce had Sterne in mind when writing *Finnegans Wake*, but, of course, it is not difficult to also see the implications for *Ulysses*:

I might easily have written this story in the traditional manner... Every novelist knows the recipe... It is not very difficult to follow a simple, chronological scheme which the critics will understand... But I, after all, am trying to tell the story in a new way … I am trying to build many planes of narrative with a single esthetic purpose. Did you ever read Laurence Sterne? (ctd. in Jolas: 399)

The multilayered philosophical and technical parallels between Sterne, and Cervantes, Diderot and Joyce are evident but when one considers *Tristram Shandy* beside the work of Machado de Assis, Flann O'Brien, Beckett, Nabokov, John Barth, Gilberto Sorrentino, Thomas Pynchon, and Italo Calvino, and a host of contemporary authors like Alessandro Baricco, John Banville, Kevin Barry, and Alasdair Gray, among many others, the deferral or avoidance of meaning, the experiment with the effectively-nullified narrator, the incessant self-consciousness, overt intertextual play, the fragmentation of chronology, order and logical

sequence of ideas, and the persistent subversion of logical argument, it becomes evident that a tradition that runs parallel to social realism has indeed a far longer history than is often suggested, although the principle of a linear historical trajectory may not be the most helpful literary-critical model, as we shall see.

For example, Patricia Waugh, in *Metafiction,* positions Sterne at the heart of an essentially historical model of metafiction in the context of her claim that language is perpetually revealed to be a self-conscious synthetic system in texts like *Tristram Shandy*: "For Sterne, as for contemporary writers, the mind is not a perfect aestheticizing instrument. It is not free, and it is as much constructed out of as constructed with, language" (24). Her framing argument is that literature, since the nineteenth century, can be viewed as a series of shifting emphases, away from realism, towards metafiction: "... as one moves from realism through modernist forms to contemporary metafiction, the shift is towards an acknowledgement of the primary reality not of this 'common-sense' context of everyday reality but of the linguistic context of the literary text" (87). Partly with reference to Roman Jakobson, she suggests that the self-conscious dominant of metafiction had existed in other eras but only became central in the second half of the twentieth century, an age of uncertainty that required literary forms to respond structurally and aesthetically. The difficulty with such a linear historically-motivated view is that Sterne, and several English precursors existed, as did Cervantes and Diderot long before that, and arguably many others if Moore is correct, so the idea of a progressive linear movement away from realism towards metafiction is questionable. Furthermore, many post-1950s novels in Europe and the United States remain largely embedded in the realist mode; in fact it isn't difficult to argue that realism remains the dominant fictive model with authors like Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, Jonathan Frantzen, and Annie Proulx in North America, as well as Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith, Graeme Swift, Nick Hornby and numerous others in the U.K.

Daniel Jernigan also questions the historically linear model, arguing instead, with respect to postmodern drama, that postmodernism tended to "tip" back and forth into modernism, offering ample evidence of a non-linear model (4). Similarly, Brian Richardson questions the replacement logic ("The Genealogies of Ulysses") and argues that even though the "master narrative avers that postmodernism necessarily replaced an

exhausted modernism just as modernism had to supplant Victorian realism" (1036), a more nuanced approach may be preferable:

It may well be that the works that remain most challenging and provocative are those that most effectively resist a facile historicisation. Literary history proper should not of course be ignored, but it should be complemented by study of the history of literature itself, however wayward, disconnected, and devious such a history might be. Indeed, one suspects that an accurate account of the literature of any interesting period should resemble less the regular branches of a family tree than unruly rhizomatic shapes that never repeat themselves— if not in fact the disorderly series of irregular wiggles that *Tristram Shandy* uses to map out his own wayward plotline … Narratives of literary history always need to be complemented and mediated by the untidy chronicle of literary forms. (1049)

The problem with assigning historical lineage frequently emerges among theorists of postmodernism and is usually resolved by arguing for what Hassan names a 'typological' understanding:

What we call a "literary period" is often not a period at all: its definition is not simply chronological but also typological. Thus we may find "antecedents" to postmodernism in Sterne, Sade, Blake, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Jarry, Hofmannsthal, Stein, Joyce, Pound, Duchamp, Artaud, Roussel, Bataille, Queneau, or Kafka. This means that we have created in our mind a model of post-modernism, a particular typology of imagination, and have proceeded to "rediscover" the affinities of various authors and different moments with that model. (108)

Hassan's typology of imagination is a useful way to resolve some of the contextual problems that arise when we view *Tristram Shandy* as part of a broader context. Other contexts, affinities, and resonances become clear once the novel is removed from a purely chronological and/or historical model. Because of the sheer complexity of its design and intellectual implications, Sterne's masterpiece has actually been claimed as belonging to a wide range of generic models: J.A. Cudden cites *Tristram Shandy* as an early example of the anti-novel (47); John Freeman views it as a reactive text to "the eighteenth century's order of things" (141); Ian Watt suggests that it is "not so much a novel as a parody of a novel" (291); Brian McHale situates it in the "distinguished and venerable tradition of learnéd wit … descending from Erasmus and Rabelais through Swift, Pope, Sterne, and Diderot …" (122); William Gass considers Sterne to be

"permanently avant-garde" (35); and Bakhtin names *Tristram Shandy* as an example of the "new subjective grotesque" (37).

The above observations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, of course, and often have more in common than the critical vocabulary suggests. In general, it is clear that a broader European, rather than exclusively English, context allows one to situate Sterne's extraordinary achievement more convincingly; in the English novelistic tradition, Sterne remains "odd" despite the efforts of several critics to set up some sense of historical belonging. However, Sterne's apparent peculiarity in an immediate English context too looks significantly different in an Irish context. Many critics who place Sterne in a European context perhaps unwittingly also make particular reference to Irish writers in their attempts to declare a broader tradition. For example, McHale's tradition of "learnéd wit" includes Joyce and Flann O'Brien, while Swift is frequently mentioned in Sterne's context, and Beckett's self-obsessed narrators in all of his fiction from the *Trilogy* onwards owe a clear debt to Sterne. Furthermore, apart from the great trio of modern Irish experimenters (Joyce, Flann O'Brien, Beckett), the influential Irish Gothic tradition that includes Sheridan le Fanu, Bram Stoker and Charles Maturin, alerts one to the strength of the non-realist tradition in Irish letters prior to the 20th Century, as does the work of authors like Edmund Downey whose *Through Green Glasses* (1887) blends elements of folk tales, Irish myth and legend with historical events, re-constructed in a wildly exaggerated comic manner[3]. Sterne also deeply resonates within an irreverent Irish comic tradition extending from Swift and Wilde and ranging widely from Brian Merriman to the contemporary novelists Patrick McCabe and Roddy Doyle. At the heart of such comic endeavour a deadly serious will to unmake, unmask and ridicule is implied. Contemporary Irish fiction, including the work of authors like John Banville, Aidan Higgins, Bernard Share, Dorothy Nelson, Robert McLiam Wilson, Nina FitzPatrick, Dermot Healy, Niall Quinn, Alf MacLochlainn, and more recently, Sebastian Barry and Anne Enright, have all extended the tradition of renegotiating the relationship between language and experience, something that *Tristram Shandy* perpetually foregrounds. Arguably, one can discern a recurring philosophical pattern of skepticism towards knowledge systems, literary models, and the very presumptions of writing itself, to the extent that it emerges as a coherent cultural characteristic in Irish writing.

Critics of Irish writing have, of course, recognised variants of this tendency in *Tristram Shandy*, with respect to the Irish literary tradition. Most notably, perhaps, Terry Eagleton links Sterne's experimental novel to Joyce, Beckett, and Swift, among others (128-32) and argues that, "like much in Irish culture, *Tristram Shandy* is at once atavistic and *avant-garde*, astonishingly 'modernist' in its experimentations" (128), and notes the novel's "skeptical stance" towards rationalist philosophical systems (78). Eagleton, predictably, however, conflates Sterne's literary experiment with a strictly historicist reading:

Just as Ireland is a digression or after-thought of England, so this ruin of triumphalist teleology which is *Tristram Shandy*, resolutely anti-Enlightenment in its deviant temporality, is set in a stagnant rural enclave by-passed by the march of progress, full of crippled, washed-up characters whose history has petrified into one enormous synchrony. (128)

He proceeds to argue that *Tristram Shandy*'s "unraveling of literary form is an oblique assault on the cultural dimension of that power," (133) in effect simplifying the rationale for the novel, rendering it simply a literary response to colonial rule from a marginal space. Considering that Sterne himself can hardly be said to have suffered from what Eagleton refers to as the "dispossession, the sheer dinginess of everyday life," (78) and, as Derek Hand has argued, Sterne "put no emphasis on his Irish roots whatsoever" (47), the strictly historical-cultural logic behind Eagleton's association of Sterne with Joyce, Beckett et al appears to be based on a narrowed logic. While Hand too suggests the possible significance of Sterne's "beginnings on the margins of the metropolitan centre," he moves beyond this and claims that Sterne's Irish influence is evident more generally in his mocking "distrust of the medium itself" (47). A. Norman Jeffares, similarly, places the notion of mockery, and a deeply-felt self-consciousness, at the centre of his understanding of Sterne's position in Irish literature: "Mock-seriousness, serious mockery: the strain runs from Swift to Shaw, from Sterne to Joyce: even gentle Goldsmith shared this capacity for self-mockery" (54).

The principle of unraveling the pretensions of the self is central to the function of self-mockery and defines the form of the narrative in the self-conscious modern novel or, as David Lodge argues: "Sterne anticipated Joyce … in letting the vagaries of the human mind determine the shape

and direction of the narrative" (82). Similarly, Jorge Luis Borges, when reviewing *Ulysses* in 1925, asserted that "[t]he Irish have always been the iconoclasts of the British Isles," (1999, 12) and detected in Joyce's novel what he viewed as strong evidence of an "ontological anxiety that is amazed not merely at being, but at being in this particular world where there are entranceways and words and playing cards and electric writing upon the translucence of the night" (1999, 14). Borges also marvels at Joyce's ability to aesthetically apprehend the "relative reality of a room seen objectively, then in the imagination, and lastly, duplicated in a mirror; he resolves that all three are real, and visually each takes up an equal amount of space" (1999, 13). Reality, then, is present in the literary text, but as a radically transformed, multi-framed, layered artifact. Also significant is Borges' fascination with the Irish philosopher, Berkeley[4] – to whose work he claims to have been introduced at the age of ten – in particular to the philosopher's famous *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived), exposure to which Borges claims made him realise "that reality and fiction were betrothed to each other, that even our ideas are creative fictions" (1982, 75).

Borges's philosophical relationship with Berkeley is of critical importance because it alerts one to an alternative intellectual lineage for Irish writing that extends at least as far back as the early 18th Century, a lineage that Kearney has called the Irish "counter-tradition" (2006, 199). In this context, Kearney has argued that Berkeley was an anti-empiricist, much closer to European idealism than to British empiricism, as were Clayton, Hutcheson, Swift, Burke and Skelton (1997, 149), all of whom contribute to Kearney's desire to establish the idea of a distinctive Irish mind with a clear tradition (2006, 19). For Kearney, the Irish mind contains a "plurality of identities," (1997, 168) and the Irish intellectual tradition "represent[s] something of a counter-movement to the mainstream of hegemonic rationalism." He concludes that the Irish mind "is one of the most sustained examples of such intellectual difference and dissent" (2006, 29). This refusal, or resistance to received meaning, or to intellectual and artistic forms has been interpreted by Borges, particularly with reference to Joyce, as "creative impiety" and "Irish audacity" (1999, 12)[5].

A variation on this position is offered by Denis Donoghue, who surmises that "it is my impression that Irish writers sense a rift between experience and meaning, but in reverse: the meaning is premature, already inscribed by a mythology they have no choice but to inherit, and then, if

they must, to resent" (152). This clearly echoes the almost compulsive desire to unmake that one finds in the parodies and satires of Sterne and Swift, Flann O'Brien and Joyce. Such a desire is articulated in many sophisticated ways, to the point that meaning itself is frequently accompanied by the perpetual mirrored possibility of its own self-conscious unwriting.

The technical components of the will to unmake frequently recur and enter into conversation with each other, across Hassan's "typology of imagination," so that even the process of footnoting, for example, becomes a formal design element that generates a complex mode of discourse across historical periods. Sterne's use of the footnote in *Tristram Shandy*, for example, using asterisks instead of numbers, is simply another mode of narrative evasion that adds an enormous amount of non-relevant, or excessive detailing[6]. Flann O'Brien, in mimicry of Sterne, similarly uses the footnote to create an absurd, digressive, sub-textual form of discourse, as in the notes on deSelby in *The Third Policeman*, in which spurious background information about De Selby scholarship, references to fake texts, and details on his scientific ideas are outlined in considerable detail. O'Brien also uses a version of Sterne's footnoting symbols to designate footnotes in the early story "Scenes in a Novel"[7] (1934), in order to establish, like his great antecedent, a mode of mock discourse and clever digression with the reader.

While there are clear and by now well-established connections between Sterne and a continental European tradition, the Irish tradition too feels a more natural home for Sterne than that of English realism. Both Kearney's Irish counter-tradition and the logic that literary traditions declare themselves via typological and philosophical sympathies, rather than by strict social and historical lineages, help to situate *Tristram Shandy*'s comic-digressive narrative avoidance, its resistance to the 'natural' connections between thinking and ordered progression, and its implicit acceptance of the notion of human thought as arbitrary and frequently trite, in a persistent, coherent, tradition of Irish writing from at least the 18th Century onwards. It is a tradition that includes Berkeley's anti-empiricism, Sterne himself, many of the dominant figures in Irish literary modernism and postmodernism, while many contemporary writers from Dermot Healy and John Banville to younger writers like Julian Gough and Mike McCormack have all extended a novelistic poetics of play and repeatedly draw our attention to the enormously problematic gulf

between the act of narrating, and the world about which one (reputedly) writes. If we conceive of a literary tradition as resonating backwards and forwards, as representing a philosophical resistance to fixed forms of meaning, order and linear progression, Sterne's work speaks, philosophically and aesthetically to the anti-realist Irish tradition, far more consistently that with respect to the English realist tradition. Of course, the possibility that the Irish and the continental European literary contexts resonate more strongly with each other than with the English literary tradition also emerges as a feasible option; in fact, the significant gravitation of Ireland's great experimental writers, Joyce and Beckett, to the European continent rather than to England, and the glaring absence of any major postmodern novelist in the English tradition that might compare to authors of the stature of Flann O'Brien, Vladimir Nabokov, Alain Robbe-Grillet, or Italo Calvino, indicates a broader confederacy of experiment and innovation between Ireland and Europe, while the English tradition, more firmly embedded in the social-realist novel may, in fact, be the odd one out after all.

❧ *Note, Notes, Anmerkungen, Notes* ❧

1   Cited in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Volume 11 (449).

2   Patricia Waugh, for example, argues that "If post-modernism shares some of the philosophies of modernism, its formal techniques seem often to have originated from novels like *Tristram Shandy*." *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), pp23-24.

3   R.M. Lee's insightful essay on Downey links his work to that of Flann O'Brien primarily because of their shared tendency to mock pre-existing authoritative texts.

4   Richard Kearney has offered solid, convincing argument for considering Berkeley Irish, quite simply because he was born, educated, lived and worked in Ireland, while making repeated references to himself as Irish (1997, 146).

5   I have written on the idea of a distinct Irish tradition more comprehensively is a previous essay, entitled "Masters of the Irresponsible: Irish Writing and the Tradition of Dissent" (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2009).

6   For example, Sterne, as author offers a point of (un)clarification to a claim made by Tristram in the form of a note: *The author is here twice mistaken; for *Lithopaedus* should be wrote thus, *Lithopaedii Senonensis Icon*. The second mistake is, that this *Lithopaedus* is not an author, but a drawing of a petrified child. The account of this, published by *Athosius* 1580, may be seen at the end of *Cordaeus*'s works in *Spachius*. Mr. *Tristram Shandy* has been led into this error, either from seeing *Lithopaedus*'s name of late in a catalogue of learned writers in Dr..., or by mistaking *Lithopaedus* for *Trinecavellius*,— from the too great similitude of the names. (*Tristram Shandy* 166).

7   O'Brien uses the asterisk and dagger symbols in his short story. Flann O'Brien. "Scenes in a Novel," in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, Eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013.

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