**Tristram Shandy, Philosopher.**

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Sterne’s narrator is concerned about his status and role in life. On the title page of his *Life and Opinions*, he designates himself a ‘Gentleman’. Unlike his father, Walter, the Turkey merchant, or his uncle Captain Toby Shandy, he does not seem to follow any trade or profession.[[1]](#endnote-1) His life – post-puberty – seems to consist of writing. What kind of writer he is, and how his *Life and Opinions* should be shelved in the library, have been the subject of debate. Chiefly, critics have discussed whether *Tristram Shandy* is more appropriately classed as, on the one hand, a satire (either a late-flowering exemplar of the Renaissance tradition of learned wit, or of Augustan satire), or, on the other, a novel (either aligning itself with the mid-eighteenth century novel, or a precursor of the post-modern, or simply the most typical novel of all).[[2]](#endnote-2) Scott Black, however, in a chapter entitled ‘Tristram Shandy, Essayist’, questions these generic designations and suggests we situate *Tristram Shandy* in the playful, digressive, thoughtful line of essayists that runs from Montaigne through Addison to Fielding.[[3]](#endnote-3) Whether or not Sterne thought of himself as writing a novel, Tristram did not. He is writing his *Life* and it is a life of the mind rather than of adventures.[[4]](#endnote-4) ‘I write,’ Tristram declares, perhaps with his thumbs in his lapels, standing before the fireplace in the SCR, ‘as a man of erudition’.[[5]](#endnote-5) He also writes as a philosopher. He refers to his life and opinions as a book ‘of strict morality and close reasoning’ (3.31.257). When he suffers a disappointment (he loses his ‘remarks’), his first instinct is to think seriously about his situation: ‘I sat me down upon a bench by the door, philosophating upon my condition’ (7.38.640). Critics and philosophers have understandably taken seriously Sterne’s treatment of philosophy and have read *Tristram Shandy* in the light of the philosophers of the long eighteenth century, frequently characterising him as more nimble-witted or insightful than dunder-headed professional philosophers.[[6]](#endnote-6) While he clearly does directly allude to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and might well have more in common with Hume’s scepticism than Locke’s empiricism, I want to suggest that Tristram’s sense of his shelf-mates in both philosophy and literature does not fit modern academic categories. Leaving on one side for the moment the challenging issue of possible relations between literature and philosophy, I want to consider what Tristram meant and his readers might have understood by the term ‘philosophy’.

When Tristram describes his father as ‘a philosopher in grain’ (1.21.76) or refers to the ‘principles of philosophy’ (2.14.136) or the ‘stores’ of the same (5.3.419) – or even the ‘aids’ and ‘dreams’ of philosophy (3.41.284.; 4.27.385) what does he mean? Would he accord with the ‘usual’ sense of the term, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*?

Originally: the branch of knowledge that deals with ultimate reality, or with existence and the nature and causes of things; = metaphysics *n.* 1a. Later: the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, and the basis and limits of human understanding; this considered as an academic discipline. (Now the usual sense.) (*OED*, s.v. Philosophy  **7.** )

The current practice of philosophy in the academy is wide and various. Although it might deal with some of the fundamental problems which have concerned thinkers since Ancient times, it approaches them in ways which would not have been recognisable to them or to Sterne and his contemporaries. At the same time, Tristram’s understanding of the terrain would also be unfamiliar to philosophers now. He name-checks an extraordinary range of practitioners from Aristotle to Zoroaster. He mentions them *en masse* in classes or sects: Stoics (3.4.190); Pythagoreans (4.17.351; 7.13.593); Dutch logicians (1.19.60; 9.12.763); ‘ethic writers’ (9.10.757); and writers on the subject of death (5.3.418). He also alludes to around 30 individuals. Here they are, arrayed in alphabetical order:

Claudius Aelianus, Aquinas, Aristotle, Avicenna, Francis Bacon, Cardan, Cato, Cicero, Richard Crakanthorpe, Rene Descartes, Epictetus, Desiderius Erasmus, Diego de Estella, Marsilio Ficino, Diogenes Laertius, John Locke, Ramon Lull, Moses Maimonides, Nicholas Malebranche, Michel de Montaigne, Plato, Pliny, Poliziano, Petrus Ramus, Razi, Seneca, Hermes Trismegistus, Voltaire, Xenophon, Zoroaster.

How many of them would be considered philosophers now?

It is necessary to clarify what meanings Sterne had in play and to differentiate between contemporary professional philosophy and eighteenth-century usages and associations, coloured as they are by Tristram’s idiosyncratic reading. Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* – a key eighteenth-century reference work – acknowledges that the term has been understood differently over time and in different contexts: ‘PHILOSOPHY, is a term used in various significations among ancient, and modern writers.—In its laxer sense it signifies the love of truth’.[[7]](#endnote-7) In this chapter I intend to analyse the ways in which Sterne uses the term philosophy and represents the activity of philosophising in his essay in philosophical/comical/Romantical/satirical fiction. I want to do three things. First, I will describe how Walter is a philosopher in both the modern and the eighteenth-century senses of the term. Second, I will argue that his son only partly follows in his mental footsteps. He rejects the disembodied rationality of academic philosophy as represented both by his father and by many of the philosophers he cites. Finally, I will suggest that Sterne dramatizes that rejection in ways that affirm the distinctive nature of literature. *Tristram Shandy* might be a philosophical novel; it might involve philosophical concepts, but it does not constitute philosophy.

There are occasions in which Sterne does use the ‘usual sense’ of philosophy, that is, the academic discipline which includes study ‘of the basis and limits of human understanding’. Over the course of several volumes, Walter Shandy delivers numerous ‘philosophic lectures’ to his brother Toby on subjects including the association of ideas and ‘a metaphysical dissertation upon the subject of *duration and its simple modes*’(3.18.222). His material is explicitly derived from Locke’s *Essay*.[[8]](#endnote-8) Moreover, the equipment of philosophic debate – ‘instruments of knowledge’ (2.5.107) such as syllogisms, hypotheses and dissertations – are scattered throughout *Tristram Shandy*. But when Walter tries to guess ‘upon what principles of philosophy’ Stevinus constructed his sailing chariot’ (2.14.136) and reads in Slawkenbergius of the superior advantages of a trumpet to ‘a demonstrator in philosophy’ (4.305), what is meant by philosophy here? Sterne is probably not referring to metaphysics and ethics, but rather:

The branch of knowledge that deals with the principles governing the material universe and perception of physical phenomena; natural science, scientific knowledge. *Obs.* exc. as retained in *natural philosophy* (natural philosophy *n.*). a1387—a1856 (*OED*, s.v. Philosophy 5†a.).

So he is using philosophy here in the eighteenth-century sense of knowledge of the natural universe – roughly what we now call physics. Tristram boasts that his father ‘was an excellent natural philosopher, and much given to close reasoning upon the smallest matters’ (1.3.4, cf. 2.7.116). Chambers – the source of much of Sterne’s knowledge of natural philosophy – opens his article ‘PHILOSOPHY’ in his *Cyclopaedia* with this definition: ‘the knowledge, or study, of nature and morality, founded on reason and experience. See KNOWLEDGE.’ In the eighteenth century, natural and moral philosophy were not divided into separate faculties. Though they have different objects of knowledge, the same methodologies – reason and experience – were applied to both. Moreover, there was an understanding that the study of nature was bound up with morality. Newtonian natural philosophy promoted a belief in order which underpinned the moral teaching of churchmen, deists and *philosophes* alike.[[9]](#endnote-9) When Tristram reminds us: ‘My father, as I told you, was a philosopher in grain,--- speculative,---systematical’ (1.21.76), he means he is a natural philosopher as he compares Walter’s speculations on aunt Dinah’s affair with Copernicus’s on the retrogradation of the planets: ‘The backslidings of *Venus* in her orbit fortified the *Copernican* system … and the backslidings of my aunt *Dinah* in her orbit, did the same service in establishing my father’s system, which, I trust, will for ever hereafter be call’d the *Shandean System*’ (1.21.76). Having a system named after you is a mark of success in natural philosophy.

Tristram declares that his father was both kinds of philosopher: ‘THO' my father was a good natural philosopher,------yet he was something of a moral philosopher too’ (II.vii.) This second type is also capacious:

*OED*, 3 The branch of knowledge that deals with the principles of human behaviour; the study of morality; ethics. Also: practical or proverbial wisdom; virtuous living. *Obs.* exc. as retained in *moral philosophy* (*moral philosophy* *n.* at moral *adj.* Special uses 2). 1340—1816

So moral philosophy comprehends both complex rational analysis and the sort of ‘mustn’t grumble’ proverbial wisdom that bolsters the man on the Clapham omnibus. The *OED*also considers proverbial wisdom – or Zen-like calm –as a separate sense of philosophy:‘**9.** The attitude or habit of a philosopher; mental or emotional equilibrium; calmness or serenity of temperament; uncomplaining acceptance of adverse circumstances; stoicism, resignation. Cf. philosophical *adj.* 3.’ Ironically, it deems this usage to be ‘Now *rare*’.

What counts as an ‘adverse circumstance’ for Walter cannot be measured by the usual scales of human value. Events trouble him in proportion to the degree to which they contradict his system of philosophy (*OED*, 6 as a count noun).[[10]](#endnote-10) When Tristram’s older brother, Bobby dies, Walter is not cast down because, while his son’s death disrupts his plans, it does not frustrate his theories. Moreover, he can achieve resignation by drawing on ‘the stores of philosophy’: ‘Philosophy has a fine saying for everything.---For *Death* it has an entire set’ (5.3.421). Walter is not able to muster complete serenity on this occasion, but he is flustered not by the strength of his grief but rather by the abundance of fine sayings available: ‘the misery was, they all at once rushing into my father’s head, that `twas difficult to string them together, so as to make any thing of a consistent show our of them’. On other occasions, Walter has to draw on his stores of wisdom and practical philosophy because life daily presents obstacles to his ‘set of opinions or ideas’:

Never did the parlour-door open---but his philosophy or his principles fell a victim to it …

------Inconsistent soul that man is! ---languishing under wounds, which he has the power to heal!---his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge! (3.21.239)

In this case, Walter is frazzled simply by his failure to have a hinge mended. He suffers greater evils when his major philosophical systems - his attempts to control the birth, nose and naming of his son – are checked. One winter’s night, Toby interrupts Walter’s discourse on Hafen Slawkenbergius’s account of the ‘ingenuity … learned men have all shewn in their solutions of noses’ with a simple question: ‘Can noses be dissolved?’ (3.41.282). The attack on Walter’s natural philosophy (his theory of noses) drives him into a fit of passion which he can only counterbalance by drawing on his moral philosophy: ‘By all that’s good and great! Brother *Toby*, said my father, if it was not for the aids of philosophy, which befriend one so much as they do,---you would put a man beside all temper.’ (3.41.284) Yet this kind of philosophy fails in the face of an experience which counts as an even greater disaster. When his brother Toby dies,

all my father's systems shall be baffled by his sorrows; and, in spight of his philosophy, I shall behold him, as he inspects the lackered plate, twice taking his spectacles from off his nose, to wipe away the dew which nature has shed upon them------ (6.25.545)

The conflict now is not simply between Walter’s theories and the way things turn out. Rather, a different factor is in play: sensibility. Toby’s sweet sympathy repeatedly gets through to Walter. To some extent there is an opposition between sentimentalism and rationalism in *Tristram Shandy*, but it is not a simple one as it is as much a part of Sterne’s experiment with the form and genre of his work as anything else. Sentiment is complicated here by the way Sterne plays games with time: he looks forward to a moment in the less distant past when Walter’s sorrow on the death of his brother will baffle him in a way that the death of his son Bobby did not.

Because of the repeated failure of philosophy in the face of experience, Tristram voices a scepticism about both academic and natural philosophers which we can also find in Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755).[[11]](#endnote-11) This scepticism is expressed not just or not so much in the definitions but in the contrary connotations conveyed by Johnson’s illustrative quotations:

**PHILOSOPHY.**

1. Knowledge natural or moral.

I have never read, heard nor seen anything, I had never any taste of *philosophy* nor inward feeling in myself, which for a while I did not call to my succour. *Sydney*.

Hang up *philosophy*,

Unless *philosophy* can make a Juliet,

Displant a town, reverse a prince’s doom,

It helps not. *Shakesp.*

The progress you have made in *philosophy*, hath enabled you to benefit yourself with what I have written. *Digby*.

2. Hypothesis or system upon which natural effects are explained.

We shall in vain interpret their words by the notions of our *philosophy*, and the doctrines of our schools. *Locke*.

3. Reasoning; argumentation.

Of good and evil much they argu’d then

Vain wisdom all and false *philosophy*. *Milton*.

His decisions are the judgment of his passions and not of his reason, the *philosophy* of the sinner and not of the man. *Roger’s Sermons*.

4. The course of sciences read in the schools.

While the definitions are neutral, Johnson smuggles in a distrust of philosophy in the illustrations. Romeo dismisses philosophy as useless to him because it cannot win him Juliet; Milton dryly condemns the devils’ ‘false *philosophy*’; Locke complains that readers misinterpret Paul’s Epistles by trying to understand them in terms of their own philosophy; John Rogers denounces ‘the *philosophy* of the sinner’ from the pulpit.[[12]](#endnote-12) Even illustrations which do not look obviously sceptical prove to be so when we return the quotations to their context. His first excerpt is from the moment in Sidney’s *Arcadia* when Pyrocles tells his friend Musidorus of the illicit love he is developing for Philoclea. Johnson’s quotation suggests that philosophy provides succour, but the next sentence in the original indicates that it is powerless against his passion: ‘But (alas) what resistance was there, when ere long my very reason was (you will say corrupted).’[[13]](#endnote-13) The Renaissance Romance writer Sidney, the devout lexicographer Johnson and the heteroclite parson Sterne might not agree entirely on the relations between reason and passion, but they all express reservations about the power of philosophy both natural and moral.

Far from being a search after truth, or a spur to virtuous living, philosophy might degenerate to mere ‘Reasoning; argumentation’ (Johnson, s.v. Philosophy, 3). The *OED* delineates the slippery slope of philosophy from reason to sophistry: ‘4.a. Rational inquiry or argument, as opposed to divinely revealed knowledge; (in *depreciative* use) mere argument, sophistry. *Obs.* c1384—1850. Walter Shandy’s rational enquiry tends towards ‘mere argument, sophistry’, a way of reasoning that amounts to little more than argy-bargy. He rationalises out of force of habit (‘My father, … had an itch in common with all philosophers, of reasoning upon every thing which happened’ (3.18.223) and, being ‘a philosopher in grain,--- speculative,---systematical’ (1.21.76.), he gets caught up in his own systems without stopping to consider either the facts or the effects of his thinking on those around him. Reasoning gets him nowhere. Philosophy for Walter is more of a hobby-horse than a vehicle.

What about Tristram? He repeatedly refuses the role of philosopher. Although he might be considered philosophical in Johnson’s third sense – ‘Frugal; abstemious’ – because, in his abstinence, he out-does Rousseau ‘a bar length’; he declares ‘------but if you think this makes a philosopher of me------I would not, my good people! give a rush for your judgments.’ (9.17.769) Sometimes this rejection arises from his character and temperament. Impatient with the way people who ought to know better ride their hobby horses, he snorts ‘then, my Lord, I cease to be a philosopher’ (1.8.14). Describing Yorick’s mercurial temperament, Tristram refuses to give a rational explanation: ‘I will not philosophize one moment with you about it’ (1.11.27), thus displaying his own mercurial temperament. Sometimes it occurs when his philosophy is frustrated by experience. Tormented by unrequited love, Tristram laments ‘------(so here my philosophy is shipwreck'd again) ------’ (8.11.670). Like his father, his attempts at rationalising are defeated by his uncle Toby. Directly after his declaration about Rousseau, Tristram begins a sentence which looks as if it will turn out to be like one of his father’s dissertations: ‘True philosophy---’. Yet he immediately interrupts himself because his train of thought it interrupted by his uncle:

but there is no treating the subject whilst my uncle is whistling Lillabullero.

---Let us go into the house. (9.17.769)

Why does Tristram reject philosophy so adamantly? In this last example, he is distracted by his uncle whistling Lillabullero (or rather he is distracted by the memory of his uncle’s whistling, though he describes the incident as if it is happening while he is writing). This reminds us that Tristram has inherited at least as much of his uncle’s sentimentality as his father’s philosophating: ‘---My uncle Toby could not philosophize upon it;---'twas enough he felt it was so’ (2.1.95) However, this opposition between philosophizing and feeling is in eighteenth-century terms false because empiricists, following Locke, considered feeling or sensation as the basis of all knowledge. Yet, it is an opposition found in ancient philosophy as described by Chambers and alluded to by Sterne in a passage I will end on. It is a passage which to me suggests a more profound opposition between literature and philosophy.

During his travels in volume VII, Tristram makes a statement that seems to pit the mind against the body and philosophising against feeling:

I love the Pythagoreans … for their … “getting out of the body, in order to think well.” No man thinks right whilst he is in it; blinded as he must be, with his congenial humours, and drawn differently aside, as the bishop and myself have been, with too lax or too tense a fibre------REASON, is half of it, SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions ------ (7.13.593)

These sentiments, which Tristram attributes to the Pythagoreans, Sterne probably found both in his favourite reference work, Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* and in one of his most important stylistic and intellectual models, Montaigne’s *Essays*. According to Chambers:

Pythagoras defines *philosophy*, a meditation on death; by which, according to Plato and Clemens is meant an abstraction or retirement from the body; which Apuleius explains: A philosopher is to study nothing so much as to set his soul at liberty from its correspondence with the body.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Compare also the opening to Montaigne’s essay, ‘That to study Philosophy, is to learn to die’, an essay from which Sterne borrows repeatedly:

*CICERO* says *That to study Philosophy is nothing but to prepare a Man’s self to die*. The Reason of which is, because Study and Contemplation do in some sort withdraw from us, and deprive us of our Souls, and employ it separately from the Body, which is a Kind of Learning to die, and a Resemblance of Death; or else because all the Wisdom and Reasoning in the World do in the End conclude in this Point, to teach us not to fear to die.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Both of these source passages treat philosophy as a purely mental activity. They consider the separation of the soul from the body as a necessary precondition for philosophising and thus philosophy is associated with death. However, in both Chambers and Montaigne, learning to die is also a way of learning to live. Chambers continues: ‘Thus Cicero calls *philosophy, ars vitae*, and Seneca *lex vitae*; and thus Plutarch—constancy, fidelity, and a sound mind, are the real *philosophy*; all the other arts of wisdom, tending any other way, are prettiness and curiosities.’ Montaigne argues that ‘it ought to have no other Aim but our Contentment only, nor to endeavour any Thing, but in Sum to make us live well, and, as the Holy Scripture says, at our Ease.’ (pp. 74-75) These passages are relevant to *Tristram Shandy* in general and this chapter in particular in a couple of ways. First, they both suggest a particular sense of philosophy, neither physical nor metaphysical, but rather a kind of middle ground between ‘ethics’ and ‘practical or proverbial wisdom’. Chambers calls it ‘*Practical* PHILOSOPHY’: ‘which lays down the rules of vertuous and happy life; and excites us to the practice thereof.’ It is in this sense that Tristram, when vexed by the loss of his remarks, says, ‘I sat me down upon a bench by the door, philosophating upon my condition’ (7.38.640). He is attempting to draw a lesson from his experience and to regulate his feelings. Tristram shares this attitude with Yorick and with his creator, the Rev. Laurence Sterne, Prebendary of York, who was frequently called upon to offer comfort *in extremis*. Yorick is the character who most successfully practices resignation and achieves the equilibrium; the ridicule and criticism he endures when riding his worn out *memento mori* of old nag ‘keep his philosophy from rusting’ (1.10.19).

Second, although they at first suggest an abstraction from the body that resembles death, they both return to life. Montaigne in particular recommends living in the body and incorporating philosophy in life. Sterne derived from Montaigne not just sentiments to decorate his text, but rather was influenced by his way of thinking and writing: a digressive style which enacts an incorporation of life into philosophy and philosophy into life. If we restore this passage to its context in volume VII, chapter xiii, it does not function as an essay on the study of philosophy. Although Sterne is influenced by Montaigne’s essayistic digressiveness and Chambers’ combination of encyclopaedic inclusiveness and fragmentation, he is also playing with the emerging novelistic tradition in which ideas are embodied in characters and tested in narrative action. Let us, then, consider the narrative situation in which Tristram expresses his love of the Pythagoreans. Tristram is on a journey south through France. He opens the chapter with a sentiment derived from Psalm 83:13, via Bishop Joseph Hall: ‘*“MAKE them like unto a wheel*”’.[[16]](#endnote-16) Hall considers motion to be a curse whereas rest is like the peacefulness of heaven.  Tristram on his travels applies this analogy to his case and reads it as ‘a bitter sarcasm, as all the learned know, against the *grand tour*’ (592). He then applies it even more literally, arguing that the Bishop hated motion because he was fat so the wheel he had in mind must have been a speedy post-chaise wheel whereas Tristram, because he is thin, loves motion and is tormented by the grindingly slow wheels of a cart. When he has developed the analogy thus far, he utters his ejaculation about the Pythagoreans and the need to get out of the body in order to think well. This sentiment at first reads as a wise reflection on how the thinking of both Tristram and the bishop were led astray by their bodily constitutions.

So far, so philosophical. But then Tristram utters what appears at first to be a rhetorical question: ‘ ------But which of the two, in the present case, do you think to be mostly in the wrong?’ However, this question is immediately answered by an unidentified woman: ‘You, certainly: quoth she, to disturb a whole family so early.’ (594) This reply utterly changes the nature of this passage. It renders it dramatic and turns the sentiments and philosophising into expositions of character and plot. What looks like writing, turns out to have been speech. Far from escaping his body into the abstraction of print, Tristram has been bodily present all along and audible to bystanders. He might even be travelling in a literal vehicle rather than a metaphorical one. In the previous chapter, he issued orders in an inn: ‘Let the horses be in the chaise exactly by four in the morning—’ (7.12.592) This chapter began with an aside telling the reader that he was in the middle of an argument with his apothecary about how and where he would submit to an enema; Tristram cannot escape uncongenial humours. Literature does not escape its body.

In such moments, Sterne proves a puzzle for contemporary definitions of both philosophy and the novel. He urges us to attend very closely to questions of definition at the same time as questioning distinctions. On occasion, he suggests that fiction and philosophy are not compatible when, for example, Tristram declares of Slawkenbergius’s treatise *De nasi*, ‘------Philosophy is not built upon tales’ (3.41.286). By insisting on the embodied nature of thought, he seems to support Ian Watt’s classic formulation the novel:

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 times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Accordingly, we must remember that in volume seven, Tristram is fleeing death, acutely conscious of his consumptive body and increasingly conscious of the pleasures offered by French women such as an innkeeper’s daughter or the sun-browned Nanette with the slit in her petticoat. Women are on his mind in this passage – or rather one woman – the mysterious Jenny, whom I deliberately omitted from the quotation: ‘I love the Pythagoreans (much more than ever I dare tell my dear Jenny)’. She is tucked into a parenthesis as if Tristram is trying to hide his dream of escaping his body from her. But she accompanies his thoughts, proving that he cannot get away from his ‘congenial humours’ and his ‘appetites and concoctions’. However, Sterne fails ‘to satisfy its readers with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions’, allowing his tale to stray into the abstract and philosophical. Tristram refuses to tell the reader who Jenny is (4.32.401). It is also not clear where she is in volume 7, chapter 13. Is she there with him in the vehicle as he speaks? She cannot be or she would hear him. Or if she is there, he is not speaking but thinking or writing. But if this sentiment is uttered in the silence of the mind or the page, how can the unidentified woman complain that he has disturbed ‘a whole family’? I think this woman is not the madam reader who has interrupted him in his narrative before, though she is a sister to her and to his mother who interrupted his father at the very beginning of his story. She exists in the present moment of his narration and brings Tristram back to his body, to his voice, to society in the form of the family and to a particular time – early morning and a place somewhere on his travels in France.

I do not wish to argue that philosophers are dull fools, out-witted by the superior intelligence and sophistication of novelists. Locke’s *Essay*, for example, is frequently lively and highly self-conscious. Nor do I wish to suggest that Tristram/Sterne is crassly dismissive of philosophers – though in the Author’s Preface he is robustly Rabelaisian: ‘wit and judgment in this world never go together; inasmuch as they are two operations differing from each other as wide as east is from west.—So, says *Locke*,---so are farting and hickuping, say I.’ (3.20.227) In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne engages with Locke in depth and detail and reads his *Thoughts on Education*, and *Treatises on Government* as well as his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. He also demonstrates great affinity with Hume’s scepticism and has proved a source of inspiration as well as pleasure to later philosophers.[[18]](#endnote-18) To adapt Shlovsky, in some ways, *Tristram Shandy* is the most typical philosophical novel in the world. At the same time, we need to recognize the different meanings of the term philosophy available to him and his readers in the eighteenth century. It encompassed natural and practical philosophy, reasoning and knowledge as well as ethics and metaphysics. Furthermore, the forms in which philosophy is now written – academic papers and monographs – are less various than in previous ages when poems, dialogues and fables might be the vehicles for philosophical debate and instruction. We should also recognise that *Tristram Shandy* is not necessarily exemplary of eighteenth-century understandings of philosophy because Sterne creates fictional characters who develop highly idiosyncratic systems of thought (the philosophy of noses is no more likely to have been a branch of academic study then as now). In his aesthetically framed writing, Sterne does not aim at the kind of truth aspired to by philosophy, but, I would argue, by bringing literature and philosophy into relation with each other, he aims at more than the kind of referential truth aspired to by the novel.

1. This chapter is based on a paper given at ‘Laurence Sterne and Philosophy. A Symposium to mark the tercentenary of his birth’, University of Sussex 14 November 2013. A version was also delivered at ‘ShandyFest!’, held at Kings College London, 20 November 2013. I want to thank the organisers of and participants at both events for giving me the opportunity to develop this material. I also want to thank Robert Chibka and Philip Horne for helping me refine the argument (in so far as it is refined).

   Walter Shandy is not someone who, like Bernard Matthews, flogs turkeys, but rather a member of the Levant Company who traded in the Eastern Mediterranean. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Much has been written on the subject of the genre of *Tristram Shandy*; the chief arguments can be found in D. W. Jefferson, ‘*Tristram Shandy* and the Tradition of Learned Wit’, *Essays in Criticism* 1 (1951): 225-248; Viktor Shklovsky, ‘A Parodying Novel: Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*’, in *Laurence Sterne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Traugott (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), pp. 61-79; Melvyn New, *Laurence Sterne as Satirist: A Reading of ‘Tristram Shandy’* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1969); Carol Watts, ‘The modernity of Sterne’, in *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*, eds David Pierce and Peter de Voogd (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 19-38; Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Judith Hawley, ‘*Tristram Shandy*, learned wit, and Enlightenment knowledge’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne*, ed. Thomas Keymer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 34-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Scott Black, ‘Tristram Shandy, Essayist’, in *The Literary Essay*, ed. Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). In another place, Scott Black argues that *Tristram Shandy* is neither a satire nor a novel as it lacks either ‘the kind of real formal reference we expect of novels or the kind of real moral application we expect of satire’ (‘*Tristram Shandy*’s Strange Loops of Reading’, *ELH*, forthcoming). He suggests, rather, that we consider it in the larger, looser tradition of the Cervantic comic romance. However he classifies it, the point that *Tristram Shandy* is generically slippery is worth making. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Adventures’ frequently appears in the title of the kind of eighteenth-century prose fictions we now call novels, see, e.g., Daniel Defoe, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719); Mary Delariviere Manley, *The Adventures of Rivella* (1714); Henry Fielding, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* (1742); Sarah Fielding, *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744); Tobias Smollett, *The History and Adventures of an Atom* (1769). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman,* The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, Vols. 1‑2, *The Text*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New, Vol. 3, *The Notes*, by Melvyn New, Richard A. Davies and W.G. Day (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978, 1984), 2.2.98. References to the text of *Tristram Shandy* are to original volume and chapter, followed by page number in the Florida Edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Distinguished work in this line includes Arthur H. Cash, ‘The Lockean Psychology of Tristram Shandy’, ELH 22 (1955), 125-35; Helene Moglen, *The Philosophical Irony of Laurence Sterne* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1975); John Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954); James Swearingen, *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy: An Essay in Phenomenological Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Lila Graves, ‘Locke’s “Essay” and Sterne’s “Work Itself”’, *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 12 (1982), 36-47; W. G. Day, ‘Locke May Not Be the Key’, in *Riddles and Mysteries*, ed. Valerie Grosvenor Myer (London: Barnes and Noble, 1984), pp. 75-83; Jürgen Klein, ‘Laurence Sterne's Novel of Consciousness: Identities of Selves and World Constructions in *Tristram Shandy*’, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 265 (1989), 1544-47; Tim Parnell, ‘Swift, Sterne, and the Skeptical Tradition’, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 23 (1994), 221-42; Christina Lupton, ‘*Tristram Shandy*, David Hume, and Epistemological Fiction’, *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (2003): 98-115; Heather Keenleyside, ‘The First-Person Form of Life: Locke, Sterne, and the Autobiographical Animal’, *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2012), 116-41; Chrisoph Henke, ‘Laurence Sterne and Common Sense: Discursive Shifts in Eighteenth-Century English Culture’, in *Sterne, Tristram Yorick: Tercentenary Essays on Laurence Sterne*, eds Melvyn New, Peter de Voogd and Judith Hawley (Delaware: Delaware University Press, 2016), pp. 59-74. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia: or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 2nd ed. (London, 1738), s.v. Philosophy. The *Cyclopaedia* was first published in 1728; Sterne probably consulted the 2nd ed. Cf. *OED* 2**.** ‘The love, study, or pursuit of wisdom, truth, or knowledge. Now *rare*. In later use usually only in etymologizing contexts. 1340—1989.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See the Florida Edition *Notes*, esp. pp. 230-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For an overview of the subject, see John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). However, proponents of Cartesian, Corpuscular, Anatomical, Mechanical, Experimental, New, and Mechanical Philosophy - all of them cross referenced from Chambers’ main article – were perceived as a threat to established religion. Employing mathematical principles and having materialist tendencies, these new and mechanical philosophers or free-thinkers were dubbed ‘minute philosophers’ by George Berkeley in his dialogue, *Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher* (1732). This sect and probably this passage is alluded to by Sterne when he describes how ‘The minutest philosophers, who, by the bye, have the most enlarged understandings, (their souls being inversely as their enquiries) shew us incontestably, That the HOMUNCULUS is … as much and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of England.’ (1.2.3) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *OED,* s.v. Philosophy, 6: ‘Freq. as a count noun. **a.** A particular system of ideas or beliefs relating to the general scheme of existence and the universe; a philosophical system or theory’, or, more precisely in this case: ‘**b.** In extended use: a set of opinions or ideas held by an individual or group; a theory or attitude which acts as a guiding principle for behaviour; an outlook or world view.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. On Johnson’s *Dictionary*, see Robert de Maria, Jr., *Johnson’s Dictionary and the Language of Learning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) and Alan Reddick, *The Making of Johnson’s Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a popular account, see Henry Hitchings, *Dr Johnson’s Dictionary: The Book that Defined the World* (London: John Murray, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.3.57-60; John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2.561-64;John Locke, ‘An Essay for the Understanding of St Paul’s Epistles by Consulting St Paul Himself’, in *The Works of John Locke in Ten volumes* (London: Thomas Tegg, et. al, 1823), vol. VIII, p. 21; John Rogers, ‘Universal Obedience to the Laws of God the Indispensable Obligation of Christians’, in *Nineteen Sermons on Several Occasions*, a new edition (London, 1784), p. 322. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembrokes [sic] Arcadia* (London, 1590), book 1, chapter 13, p. 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Melvyn New identifies a different source, John Norris, *Practical Discourses upon Several Divine Subjects, Volume Two* (1691). See the note to this passage in the Penguin Classics edition, ed. Melvyn New, Intro. Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton, 5th ed., 3 vols (London, 1738), vol. 1, p. 74. Sterne borrows from this essay at 5.1.415, 5.4.426, 5.11.436-7 and 7.12.591. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Joseph Hall, *Quo Vadis?* (London, 1617), pp. 83-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), p. 32. For an account of critics who have contested many of Watt’s claims, see Nicholas Seager, *The Rise of the Novel (Readers' Guides to Essential Criticism)* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For recent discussions of these issues, see Klaus Vieweg, James Vigus and Kathleen M. Wheeler, eds., *Shandean Humour in English and German Literature and Philosophy* (London: Legenda, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)