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Cynthia N. Malone

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University, cmalone@csbsju.edu

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Writers and Critics at the Dinner Table: TRISTRAM SHANDY as Conversational Model

Cynthia Northcutt Malone

There is nothing so foolish, when you are at the expence of making an entertainment of this kind, as to order things so badly, as to let your criticks and gentry of refined taste run it down: Nor is there any thing so likely to make them do it, as that of leaving them out of the party, or, what is full as offensive, of bestowing your attention upon the rest of your guests in so particular a way, as if there was no such thing as a critick (by occupation) at table.

—I guard against both; for, in the first place, I have left half a dozen places purposely open for them—and, in the next place, I pay them all court—

*—Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (II.ii.60)*

Digital media make possible the blending, fusing, even violent yoking of forms and genres: animated typography with audio; virtual historical sites with documents and video. Some mixtures yield glorious results; some fizzle; some reek. Oddly, two related textual forms have so far largely resisted the forces of mashup. Literary works and critical responses— reviews, scholarly essays, blog postings, and the like—typically inhabit separate discursive spaces. A few exceptions, especially critical editions and casebooks, do bind together literary works and critical essays. Yet, on the whole, critical and literary works resist fusion.

*Criticism attracts criticism; scholarly studies accrue citations as they roll along. (That scholarly articles often cite earlier articles in order to wad them up and toss them in the bin, clearing space for the work at hand—never mind that just now.) And critical essays do quote bits of the texts they examine. As for literary works, almost anything sticks like a burr in their shaggy coats, any text from *Paradise Lost* to a chewing-gum jingle. Contemporary experimental writing invites collaboration of many kinds, yet rarely, even now, does a writer allow critical work to lodge in a literary text.*

To borrow Sterne's metaphor, writers and criticks [see above] usually take their meals in separate dining rooms. The publisher distributes a work; the reviewer, scholar, or citizen blogger publishes a response. Occasionally a writer feels moved to respond to the criticism and sends a letter to an editor, or an interviewer asks the writer about specific matters in a critical response. These exchanges only illuminate the conventional separation between the literary work and the critical response, as an exchange of letters highlights the fact of separate postal addresses. How odd, how quaint that separation seems in a digital environment of crossovers.

*Laurence Sterne bridged the separation 250 years ago, with Volume III of *Tristram Shandy*. As the epigraph demonstrates, *Tristram Shandy* first sets places for the criticks in Volume I, published in 1760; Tristram then mocks, scolds, beefs about, and quarrels with them in Volume III, published a year later. By the time Sterne composed Volume III, Volumes I and II had proven a sensation. Moreover, Sterne's publication of *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* had provoked great ire. When writing Volume III, then, Sterne had his pick of critics to seat at his dinner table as guests or targets. One example illustrates the point: the *Monthly Review* had featured a review of Volumes I and II in the form of a fictional dialogue between Sir John and Sir Peter, a traveller just returned to England. Sir Peter asks about recent developments in his home country, and Sir John winds up a scathing description of *Tristram Shandy* with this summary: "In few words, Sir, and without a figure, *Tristram Shandy* is an obscene novel, the reverend author is a prebend of the church of England; and both are at present in the highest estimation" (qtd. in Howes 96). Sterne deploys Tristram to answer this review. Comparing the body and mind to a jerkin and its lining, Tristram complains that "never poor jerkin has been tickled off, at such a rate as it has been these last nine months together": "—You Messrs. the monthly Reviewers!—how could you cut and slash my jerkin as you did?—how did you know, but you would cut my lining too?" (III.iv.115).*

*It was the serial publication of *Tristram Shandy*, of course, that gave Sterne the opportunity to answer the reviewers of earlier volumes. In fact, serial publication created the possibility not only for respons-*