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SYNAESTHETICS AND LAURENCE STERNE'S FICTION

Brigitte Friant-Kessler

This essay investigates synaesthetic effects in eighteenth-century literature, during the sensibility vogue, with a specific focus on Laurence Sterne's two novels *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767) and *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), alongside a set of illustrations that feature elements related to sentiment, feeling, and the complex interaction of touch and sight. Sterne was not a synaesthete in the modern sense of the word. If a shortcut in defining synaesthesia may be formulated as, say, a neurocognitive condition based on the confusion of senses, then Sterne's fiction does not qualify. Nor can we posit Sternean characters as being affected by any known form of synaesthesia, such as, for instance, colour/sound correspondence. However, conflating, or rather staging, more than one sense in a single episode is akin to creating a synaesthetic effect, the combination of which can prove fruitful if we look at Sterne's fiction from that particular angle.

For this paper, synaesthetics as opposed to synaesthesia, does not refer to manifestations in people, or characters as it were, whose sensorial functioning differs from that of the mainstream population. Moreover, it is essential to distinguish between synaesthesia as related to psychology from that in literature, although overlapping between those two areas is always possible. Literary forms of synaesthesia have been a longstanding device of aesthetic and stylistic creativity, principally in poetry, and mostly at a metaphoric level. For instance, in order to generate a more vivid image of the Inferno in the reader's mind, Dante associates hearing, sight and/or the sensation of heat in the first Canto of the *Divine Comedy*: "E'en such made me that beast withouten peace/Which, coming on against me by degrees/Thrust me back thither where the sun is silent" (Dante *Inferno* 1). Synaesthetics in Sterne's fiction departs from such a model as it is not based on a criss-cross of metaphors but on an original, often unpredictable combination of more than one sensory plane. In Sterne's case, his writings extend beyond figurative speech.

In order to gain a broader view of Sterne's synaesthetics, this paper looks at the perception of texts as sensorially informed, at the way the senses can be combined because of the presence of illustrations, and how such a blending enables an act of reading that is paradoxically, yet simultaneously, rewarding and frustrating. My goal is to show that, while Sterne's novels belong to a larger literary corpus in the age of sensibility, they oddly stand out too, partly on the grounds of self-consciousness, but mostly because of the kind of multifaceted humour distilled in them. The word-and-image approach I

propose is thus based on the exploration of Sterne's use of imagery designed to construct a multisensory environment in accordance with what John Mullan describes as a "comedy of sentiments," (Mullan 1994), and secondly I will discuss literary illustrations as images that foreground a single-entendre which is significantly reductive. Finally, I will address the question of the materiality of the book that comes into play to enhance more than one sensory mode of perception.

1. HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF MOTION AND EMOTION: A MATTER OF CONTACT

Let the bodies speak

The latter part of the eighteenth century, as Ann Jessie Van Sant has demonstrated, was a period during which the relation between body and mind could be variously defined, and therefore one would often find terms like "feeling" and "touch" used interchangeably because "the physiological language of sensibility derives from terms for sensory processes and neural responsiveness, since sensibility also concerns matters of the heart" (Van Sant 9). In context, this meant that the fusion of senses was conceivable, mainly via metaphorical language, though, as I shall explain later, not exclusively so. As an author, Sterne was aware of the possibilities such metaphors could afford, and, as a preacher he was well-versed in rhetoric and body language. His originality lies in fusing not only the senses, but, by exploiting theatricality, his prose is also made to oscillate between the humorous and the non-humorous, as has been argued by several critics, including Paul Goring and Alexis Tadié.

Goring's view on theatricality integrates the idea that, with Sterne, "the languages of sex and sentiment can readily collapse into one" (Goring 174). The capacity to play and engage with the tenets of sensibility and the values of sentimentalism allows for a space in which the combination of senses contributes to an aesthetic and idiosyncratic feature of the author's fiction. Most rhetorical devices can be perceived as both effective and ornamental, but Sterne's use of aposiopesis is, *inter alia*, an essential component of his humoristic style, as is what I term a "pendular pattern" characterised by iteration and mobility. Tadié comments on the syntactic quality of a succession of gestures in some passages of Sterne's fiction and the possibility of communicating emotions via body language (Tadié 1994). When associated with a pendular pattern so as to emphasise instability, hesitation and doubt, sentimental scenes frequently imbued with pathos, become humorous. Interruption plays an important role in that mechanism.

A great deal of critical literature has looked at how Sterne derives pleasure from playing games with the reader's anticipation of a climactic moment that does not find resolution into harmony. In that respect, *tactus interruptus* proves an efficient strategy. Most recently, W. G. Day has shown how incomplete syntactic units and an overall rhetoric of fragments that are recurrently interrupted create an overarching system. From a formal viewpoint, *Tristram Shandy*, in particular, appears to be Sterne's novel in which *tactus interruptus* is so prominent that it even comprises the serialised publication format (Day 95). In *A Sentimental Journey*, the "dramatisation of the trope" (Day 98) affects less typography and the layout, except for one striking example commented on by Day, and only really valid for a text in its original edition. After "The Temptation," which ends in an aposiopetic "then," the beginning of "The Conquest," sports a title written so large in type that, in the face of it, readers can be easily tricked into pursuing the narrative without noticing the grammatical sequence, logical as it is though. But by moving back and forth between the chapters, you actually realise the size of the trap and can barely suppress a smile (Day 106). Alongside such aposiopetic fragments, Sterne frequently uses intermittence.

In Sterne's fiction, the various forms of aposiopesis underscore absence rather than presence, or rather, as with a Joycean paradox, the trope reinforces absence as the highest form of presence.¹ Pendularity and intermittence, in contrast, allow for a space with a different haptic experience and offer a temporality in which contact actually occurs, thus enabling the reader to perceive the narrator's motion as the mirroring of various emotional states, including his own. By combining a *tactus interruptus* mode and pendularity, which entails a smoother type of fluctuation, Sterne's narratives of sentiment and sensibility lay bare the very devices on which they are built and thrive. Scenes bearing on alternating looks illustrate how matter and motion interact. Oscillating movements and the rich sensory prism of the text thus furnish a successful spectrum of synaesthetic effects, which, to put it in Frédéric Ogée's terms ought to remind us that the *Journey* is a vibrating piece (Ogée 1994, 188), that also incorporates its comic aspects.

Every reader in his humour

The pendular pattern does not preclude *tactus interruptus* as an overall trope that contributes to humour, but it affects the reader-viewer differently. While it can indeed be seen as a miniaturised sequence of *tactus interruptus*, its smaller scale of amplitude accelerates the hesitation and the tension

¹ Joyce had a reputation for jibes with a paradox, and the style was apparently relayed by his own students. The absence/presence one would appear to be of that origin though evidence for that is scarce.

between humour and non-humour, between what is congruent and not. Aposiopesis is almost entirely suspensive as to possible endings replaced by blanks, dashes, asterisks, etc. The pendular motion, on the other hand, is more akin to a multiple choice system in which boxes have been ticked in advance. Though both are designed to rock the reader's emotional boat, the latter is perhaps more able to lull the reader into oblivion of authorial manipulation. Why not, after all, fully trust a narrator whose account of Maria, the forlorn girl, and Yorick, the sentimental traveller, shapes a moving tale of sorrow and nostalgia? By sharing a tear-soaked handkerchief and exchanging emotion-laden looks, this couple conjured a sentimental vision that plunged virtually half Europe into distress, a phenomenon evidenced by the afterlife of Maria as a character which developed into a cult that spread largely beyond Great Britain (de Voogd and Neubauer 248).

Since emblematic scenes in which there is a pendular pattern tend to be epitomised by an iterative "then/then," or a structural pattern by which alternation, wavering, moving back and forth, lead us to speculate about the nature of the narrator's sentiment, the action described is frequently performed as if on stage. The passage under discussion is couched in terms that indicate both a slow rhythm and a mobile gaze: "I sat down close by her; and Maria let me wipe them away as they fell with my handkerchief.—I then steep'd it in my own—and then in hers—and then in mine—and then I wiped hers again—and as I did it, I felt such undescribable emotions within me, as I am sure could not be accounted for from any combinations of matter and motion" (*ASJ* 108). This fictional moment has been variably described. Some view it as "drooling affectation" (Keymer 91) while, at the other end of the interpretative spectrum, it is more "a sentimental bridge between sufferer and sympathizer" (Gerard 153). Critics in general, though, show an acute awareness of the versatility embedded in that scene. The body language is certainly eloquent but, as Keymer observes, the "exchange of bodily fluids gives way to a conclusion in which sentimental sympathy dwindles" (Keymer 91). The shifting looks and the contact experienced through the fabric of the handkerchief signify a blending of touch and sight. What begins as indicative of a sense of communion with throbbing hearts, and a moving eye spectating the moved, terminates in leaving the reader thinking that oscillation can also mean lack of steadiness and absence of reliability. Illustrations to that scene tend all to be of one kind; they strive to harness sympathy and the sentiment. A visual rendering with a different interpretation would probably be a caricature. In order to hyperbolise affectation, as M-C Newbould has demonstrated, there would have to be elements of the grotesque, and distortions. While several episodes of the *Journey* have indeed been transposed in that mode, for instance, by Richard Newton and Thomas Rowlandson (Newbould 2009), there does not seem to have been a contemporary graphic satirist who illustrated Yorick and Maria sharing the handkerchief, with a degree of satire, or a stronger emphasis on the sub-text's double entendre.

2. WHY A PICTURE MAY (ALMOST) SPEAK A THOUSAND WORDS

Affecting moments?

The handkerchief scene was illustrated by Angelica Kauffmann in 1782.² A print after Kauffmann (Gerard 150) depicts both characters absorbed by the handkerchief whose central position marks the bonding power of the piece of fabric, which looks like a life-line between Yorick and Maria. As such, it may channel vibrations back and forth between them though the lingering and the wavering is not perceptible. That picture has all it takes to fall into the category of what David Alexander names “affecting moments.” Alexander points out that the appeal for such images proved ephemeral, and those prints and paintings were gradually removed from sight after the late 1770s (Alexander 13). In spite of what Keymer notes as “a suggestively eroticised exchange of bodily fluids” (Keymer 91) where words, like emotions, matter and motion can each be perceived as a double entendre, visual transpositions steer away from any charge of ambivalence. And yet John Mullan (amongst others) argues that these are the scenes which continually associate “sentimental encounters with erotic excitement (all those little contacts of eyes and fingers)” (Mullan 236). Mullan’s observation sounds like a plea for a non-existent “erotico-sentimental” category, a class in its own right, yet in keeping with a mixed authorial agenda. In the same way, Marc Martinez has categorised Sterne’s humour, at least for *Tristram Shandy*, as “joco-serious” (Martinez 53), which is another compound term that springs from the blending of modes and genres in the original texts.

Since Sterne’s trope of *tactus interruptus* is rooted in the belief that language and touch can coalesce in the reader’s mind, both body and language are brought together in a similar argument and the locus of that convergence is what forms Sterne’s system of representation. The episode depicting Yorick in the process of purchasing (or not) a pair of gloves in Paris is, in many ways, sentimental too, but has, on grounds of the pendular pattern, much to offer by way of sensory fusion and therefore an inclination for subverting humour. When Yorick narrates his encounter with the Parisian milliner, gloves are connected to feeling, touch and emotional turmoil (*ASJ* 52-53). There are only four occurrences of the word ‘glove’ in Sterne’s fiction and all of them in *A Sentimental Journey*. Gloves, like a handkerchief, can mediate emotions that are passed on to the characters’ arms and hands and clearly involve touch. Gloves may occasionally also be accessories of interest to fetishists, as argued by

² Due to copyright restrictions, I can only suggest viewing the print in W. B. Gerard’s book *Laurence Sterne and the Visual Imagination* (Gerard 150), or on the cover of *The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe*.

Warren Oakley (Oakley 79). They are, in Sterne's narrative, conductible in a way one might describe an electric charge, which is an allusion to Hartley's materialist theory of vibrations.

Moving accessories

In *Elements of Criticism*, Lord Kames suggests an object like a glove can trigger a secondary emotion: "I must add, that a secondary emotion may readily swell into a passion for the accessory object, provided the accessory be a proper object for desire" (Kames 55). The Grisset's beauty is that of the gloves in *A Sentimental Journey*, and the idea of accessory object is close to what occurs in the glove shop between Yorick and the Grisset, only that the object of desire is not the gloves themselves, as indicated by Newbould's study of the painting by Gilbert Stuart (Newbould 2013, 183). There is a physical, sensory and psychological interaction in this seduction scene in which motion, emotion (pink-tinted cheeks for the Grisset), and suppressed attraction are interlocked so as to contaminate (or not) the reader's mind with less than chaste images, depending on how infected a brain one possesses:

The beautiful Grisset rose up when I said this, and going behind the counter, reach'd down a parcel and untied it: [...] There are certain combined **looks** of simple subtlety—where whim, and **sense**, and seriousness, and nonsense, are so blended, that all the languages of Babel set loose together could not express them — they are communicated and caught so instantaneously, that you can scarce say which party is the infector. (*ASJ* 52)

The medical imagery of an "infector" echoes the pulse-feeling that takes place in another chapter. The scene is shot through with rippling waves of energy that move back and forth between him and her, via the parcel of gloves. Thus, Sterne infects the reader's brain by conjuring an image of circulating tension in this ambiguous practice of glove choosing. In the chapter "The Temptation" (*ASJ* 89), the parcel that is being untied before Yorick morphs into the purse of the fair fille de chambre whose "parcel" is destined to be untied with a more corporeal meaning. In that respect, the pendular pattern being repeated at intervals, particularly in *A Sentimental Journey*, creates an overall effect of combined sensory manifestations. In the glove scene, sight prevails but the intensity of the "combined looks" and the characters eschewing speech, alongside the infection metaphor, set the whole shop virtually ablaze. However, the word "sense" is also used here as a way to introduce its counterpart "nonsense," and whim may be indicative of a call on the reader to take that situation more in jest than in seriousness.

The type of motion registered between the two protagonists expands time and thus considerably heightens the tension and the possibilities for the reader to experience simultaneously sight, touch and

an affective response: “The beautiful Grisset look’d sometimes at the gloves, then side-ways to the window, **then** at the gloves—and **then** at me. I was not disposed to break silence—I follow’d her example: so I look’d at the gloves, **then** to the window, **then** at the gloves, and **then** at her—and so on **alternately**.”³ (*ASJ* 53) What the glove scene leads us to understand is that Yorick’s emotional state is a multisensory compound, reinforced by the alternating motion from which it proves difficult to sift out the most important element — in that, it is in keeping with Van Sant’s view on the difficulty of choosing an entirely adequate term for the sensory, physiological and psychological experience that is narrated. However she mainly insists on touch: “Touch is not only the fundamental sense in a psychology of sensibility; it is the central sense” (Van Sant 91).

In Sterne’s fiction, the emphasis is often on the non-verbal to evoke the circulation of an emotional flow. The wavering in the act of evaluating the commodities offered by the foreigner is underscored by the pendular pattern that describes how Yorick and the Grisset exchange looks. Because of its theatricality, this episode, as well as “The Pulse” (*ASJ* 50), are examples of what Goring has described as the “staging of witnessed eloquent gesture,” in which the narrator functions as “a mobile viewpoint” (Goring 157) and in which mobility sets the pace of the act of reading, mainly on the grounds of the pendulum pattern destined to count the throbs and reflect the “critical ebb and flow of her fever” (*ASJ* 51). Most illustrations to the glove scene are modelled on a tableau in which a couple is leaning over the counter. In effect, the very stasis of such a representational mode obliterates any possibility of perceiving how erotically-charged the fragment can be. In spite of the characters’ proximity, there are, however, examples of illustrations to sentimental scenes that verge so strongly on pornography that we can assume the possibility of blending senses intradiegetically as well as extradiegetically.

3. SYNAESTHETICS BEYOND WORDS

Sensing Ambivalence

In “Histories of Print, Histories of Emotion,” Laura Mandell argues that print and emotions partake of a common process, which is fundamentally linked to the philosophical question of ‘impressions,’ thus positing the role played by the body in conjunction with the mind. Furthermore, she suggests that “the sensory impression circulated in communication — immediately since we are all co-creators of them — exist as bodily performances” (Mandell 120). Mandell’s thesis rests on the idea that

³ Emphasis mine.

paper onto which ink is printed is a surface that may equally function as an interface between the body, the senses and emotions. Consequently, there is a chain of emotions, conveyed through the senses and sensations. Moreover, Angel and Gibbs contend that “Both handwriting and typeface are also haunted by gesture as an affective medium, immediately comprehensible at a sensory level by virtue of the synaesthetic capacity to translate from one sensory modality into another” (Angel and Gibbs 166). If this holds true for printed text, the case of illustrated scenes would appear to complicate the issue a step further, as they may not be “immediately comprehensible,” or rather too rapidly.

The encounter of Tristram with Maria and her goat is a harbinger of the episode in *A Sentimental Journey* where Maria and Yorick are depicted near the brook with the handkerchief, and she is holding her dog Silvio by a leash. In *Tristram Shandy*, the scene is set in an interpolated tale entitled “The Invocation” (*TS IX. 24. 780*). Tristram finds Maria deserted by her lover, sitting under a poplar, with a goat. In the course of this encounter, the animal crystallises the comic turn of an otherwise melancholic and sentimental scene: “MARIA look’d wistfully for some time at me, and then at her goat — and then at me — and then at her goat again, and so on, alternately —” (*TS IX 24. 783*). The motion of Maria’s head between Tristram and the goat enhances the comical ambiguity of Tristram’s assumption of what is passing through her mind. “— Well, Maria, said I softly — What resemblance do you find?” The goat, whose Latin root points to connotations of lechery and disloyalty, as demonstrated by Marc Martinez, “hybridizes the humorous and the sentimental” (Martinez 64). It occupies the position of a non-human mediator, but, at the same time, projects caprine features onto the male protagonist.

Ever since 1778, when the Dantzig-born engraver Daniel Chodowiecki provided a set of illustrations for a *Tristram Shandy* edition including depiction of Maria and her goat, images relating to this episode have underscored an overtly sentimental tone, up to the twentieth century (fig. 1 Wheelwright, 1926).⁴ The one artist to depart from such a sentimental vein is the American conceptualist John Baldessari, whose photo-collage insists on the incongruous vis-à-vis established between Tristram and the goat⁵ (fig. 2. Baldessari). Baldessari’s artwork for the prestigious 1988 Arion Press edition juxtaposes the textual excerpt and a surprising black and white photograph of a fully be-whiskered man, evidently engaging in some sort of conversation with a goat. In line with other works by Baldessari from

⁴ Wheelwright’s complete set of illustrations to *Tristram Shandy*, together with a large selection of illustrated editions can be viewed online at:
http://www.tristramshandyweb.it/sezioni/sterne/biography/sterne_portraits/tristram/1926/pagine/16_1926.htm

⁵ As mentioned in the catalogue of Arion Press, the photo-collages and the quotations were printed by offset lithography.



Maria looked wistfully for some time at me, and then at her goat

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Fig. 1: Rowland Wheelwright, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (London: G. Harrap, 1926). (Private collection)

the late 1980s, the photo has been cropped from an entirely different visual environment, but the combined presence of man and animal — and no Maria to be seen — generates a logical causality based on the analogy between man and goat. The latter brings a sentimentalism into play in the text which is subverted into a male/male encounter in the photo-collage, meant to underscore instinct and impulse rather than polite conversation and restraint. The physical motion, body language, sentiment and sight operate a strange chemistry making of



Fig. 2: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. San Francisco, Arion Press, 1988. photo-collage by John Baldessari. (Private collection).

this scene an example of what Goring sees as: “jewels buried in mud: moral and affecting passages surrounded by lewdness, but not totally compromised or contaminated by it” (Goring 194). Sterne, it would seem, was particularly prone to concealing such jewels in *A Sentimental Journey*.

Indiscreet jewels buried in mud

The scene of the *fille de chambre* displaying her purse and that of the Grisset having her pulse kindly felt by a surrogate Dr Yorick are two further fictionalised moments with a pendular pattern in which double entendre and multisensory experience are brought together. On their first encounter, Yorick has generously given a he met in the street in Paris, outside a bookshop, a crown. The passage with the purse focuses simultaneously on Yorick’s fluctuating sensations and moral wavering and on the girl demonstrating her gratefulness and displaying a small purse she has sewn herself to preserve the precious gift and to show how valuable it is to her: “ten minutes with the back of my hand resting upon her lap—looking **sometimes** at the purse, **sometimes** on one side of it” (*ASJ* 89). With the engraving provided by John Thurston, one can visualise touch (Gerard 123). The man’s hand on her lap, was, as Gerard argues, likely to have been perceived as improper (Gerard 122). The general composition remains static; the four-poster bed may seem like an appeal to sexual intercourse but despite intimacy and contact, the image does not hint in any way at the physiological vibrations which silently pass from one party to the other. Nor does it bear signs of supposedly discreet albeit voiced hesitations. If ever a picture was meant to replace a thousand words, this one appears to fall short of quite a few, and does not seem to do justice to the tension of the moment when, as John Mullan argues, “Both sentiment and suggestiveness live at the edges of speech; both start to make their meanings where words stop” (Mullan 239). Thurston illustrated the entire 1802 edition of *The Complete Works of Sterne* in a similar fashion: small vignettes, in a semi-realistic somewhat sober vein, that emphasise moral values which are upheld by the selection of prints. Unlike Thurston’s, Norah McGuinness’s stylised, and delicately executed, Art Deco design, dated 1926, pictures a single figure. The light-hearted *fille de chambre* is shown fiddling with the ribbons of her billowing gown.⁶ The suggestiveness of her posture, combined with the open purse, hint at loose moral principles as to where the money may go, but equally as to what is to happen with her virtue. The allusion is quite clear but, in view of Yorick’s absence, any form of interaction involving touch disappears, and much of the scene’s tension conveyed through the

⁶ This image is scarce available but may be viewed on the *Tristram Shandy* website, under the section Illustrations 1926:
http://www.tristramshandyweb.it/sezioni/sterne/biography/sterne_portraits/sentimental/1926/pagine/91_1926.htm

“sometimes/sometimes” rhythm is lost. Yorick feeling the Grisset’s pulse, with an onlooking husband, is another haptic passage of the same kind, from which illustrators like Thomas Rowlandson, in the vein of other caricatures he produced at the time, teased a burlesque and jocular representation of an archetypal moment in the literature of sensibility.

The reference to vibrations, the arteries and physiological symptoms makes “The Pulse” a significant contribution to the vogue of sensibility. That print by Rowlandson, after Newton’s design, has been amply reproduced, documented and frequently commented on in critical works, amongst which those of Gerard, Keymer, Oakley. According to Van Sant, the scene is a telling example of what she describes as a feminised parodic body. As she argues: “Sterne exploits the instability of the term sensation to create a collision of the moral, sexual and physiological suggestiveness of sensibility. No resolution is possible, and readers remain at the juncture that creates parody and demands interpretation” (Van Sant 109). In many respects, prints or illustrations offer critical comments on the text. However, they do not seem to be the ideal medium for synaesthetic scenes. One wonders actually if there is such a medium, outside motion picture or animated film. In fact, some images can even prove counterproductive.

The eye and the thumb: from the surface of words to skin-deep sensation

When illustrators choose a blatant pornographic interpretation, an image is even less able to transpose the verbal complexity and its ambiguous connotations. One such example is to be found in the set of mezzotints known as the “Curious Cuts” from the Amsterdam edition.⁷ The epithet *fair* is used for the *fille de chambre* in Paris, but, as noted by Anne Bandry, it is not by chance that in Sterne’s first novel Trim describes the Beguine in Flanders who nursed his wounded knee as a *fair Beguine* (Bandry 2000, 124). In both examples, the reader experiences the acute awareness, and possibly delight, of feeling trapped by the innuendo and the wavering between several possibilities. There is, of course, always the option of remaining floating in a limbo of indeterminacy too. In the interpolated narrative of Trim and the fair Beguine, we can register a sophisticated aesthetics of blending that generates both a comic effect and the perception of an aural, visual and tactile cross-modal experience activated by a variant of the pendular pattern, namely friction: “As she continued rub-rub-rubbing — I felt it spread from under her hand, an’ please your honour, to every part of my frame — (*TS VIII 22. 703*). Trim and the Beguine seems to be a good example of yet another jewel in the mud, investigated as a case of *tactus interruptus*

⁷ For details on that edition, see Friant-Kessler 2004.

by W. G. Day, who views it as evidence toward the “reification of the rhetorical” (Day 100). The scene is also apt to correspond to what Mullan has classified as “Sterne’s supposedly pathetic vignettes” (Mullan 1994, 235). Touch is described and simultaneously depicted. The pendular gaze, the hand and the vibrations noticed previously, crystallize in the back-and-forth movement of the Beguine’s soothing action. When Trim reports to Uncle Toby about the warm welcome and the beneficial treatment received during his convalescence, the Beguine’s kindness truly turns into a case of delicacy. Steven Connor explains that what is delicate “solicits lingering contemplation” (Connor 2007). The combination of a delicate touch and the sympathy with which the Beguine increasingly accentuates her friction of the knee sets it somewhere between the literal and the metaphoric, between the ethical and the comical. While it may be solely perceived as a manifestation of the sentimental and pathetic vein of the narrative, the actual reading aloud of *rub, rub, rub* alludes to a contact of a more suggestive nature than mere massaging of a stretch of skin located a little above the rotula. The formulaic “rub-rub-rubbing” adds a layer to the author’s humour. It is ideal for bifurcation, as is the final long dash which materialises *tactus interruptus*. Iteration in turn creates a contagious commotion, rather like the one felt by the corporal. The reader is provided with a word that relates to touch, but which is simultaneously heard — one must remember that silent reading was not necessarily the norm in Sterne’s days — and experienced as a sensation, in a scene suggestive enough so as to be pictured in the reader’s mind. This is something that has been extensively addressed by Tadié, for instance (Tadié 2003).

In order to highlight the sympathy displayed by the nursing nun, most illustrations to that episode treat it like an affecting moment, with the exception of one erotic mezzotint in the Amsterdam edition of *Tristram Shandy*, in which the plate facing the end of the passage gives way to a very explicit transposition, captioned “I seiz’d her hand” (fig. 3). The print from that edition may not do justice to Sterne’s text, and a crude rendering it is indeed. But the two together allow for a cross-modal experience in the reader’s mind, and a synaesthetic effect triggered and channelled through the text-image relationship. The Beguine’s action is a narrative of displacement in which a named part of the body is made to nudge the reader into thinking of an unnamed one, a device Sterne also deploys for the nose. While *Tristram Shandy* cannot be said to fall into the category of what Jean-Marie Goulemot, playing on a passage from Rousseau’s *Confessions* (Rousseau 36), implies are inconvenient books because “they can only be read with one hand (Goulemot, title), this particular edition leaves little to the imagination. The point in mentioning those plates as part of a cross-modal perception of the novel is to underscore once more the predominance of sight at the expense of the other senses. The problem with a visual rendering that leaves no choice but to take the dirty road,⁸ as Eugenius might have put it, is

⁸ A metaphor used in a famous conversational passage from *Tristram Shandy* (TS III. 31, 258) which epitomises the central point of constantly bifurcating paths in the novel.

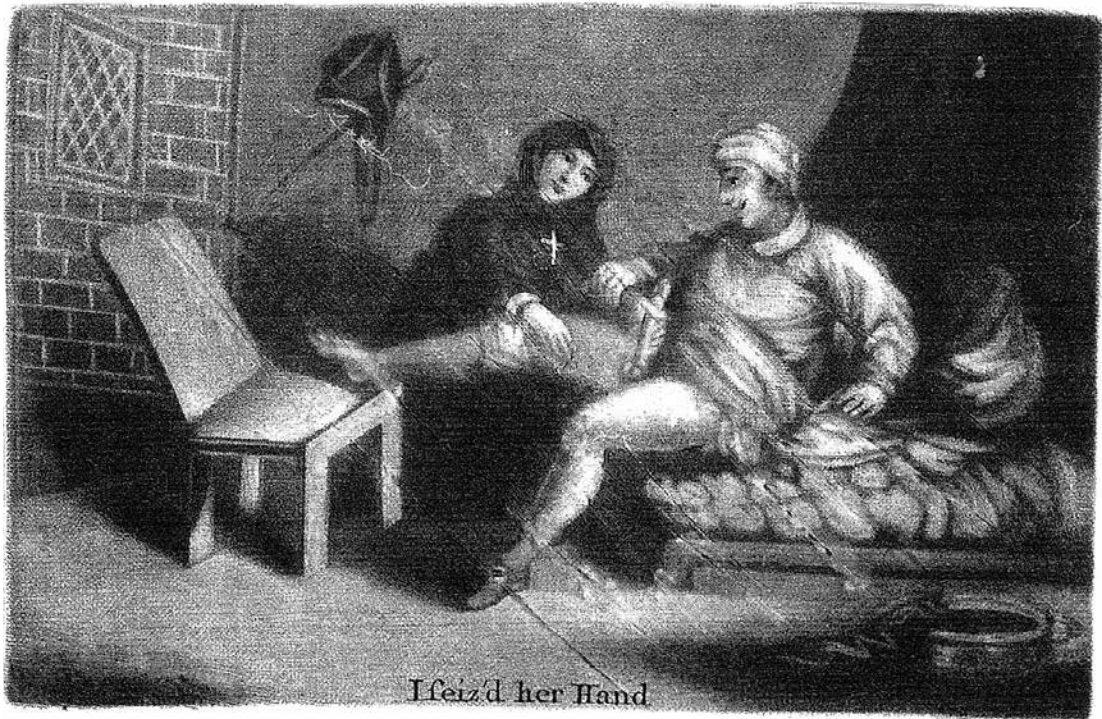


Fig. 3: Anonymous mezzotint captioned “I seiz’d her hand”. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. (British Library PC31g21).

its intrinsic limits to representing motion. Sterne’s playfulness with the tenets of sentimentalism is thus in keeping with Goring’s viewpoint that he is a writer who “makes an argument for the inseparability of sentiment and erotic desire” (Goring 199). Book illustrations, by nature, put the weight on sight. They may simultaneously be conducive to an eye and finger contact of another sort.

Although the ambivalence inherent in the motion of the Beguine’s hand is beyond what a print can translate, while clearly something imagination can easily conjure and make the reader-viewer feel and experience vicariously, motion in the text, combined with the handling of the material book with illustrations, makes for a different type of sensory experience. The pendular movement of the reader’s eye, from the print to the page and then back, forms part of a what I categorise as a “synaesthetic after-

effect,” further enhanced by the fact that readers seeking to derive pleasure from erotic prints could naturally engage in something I term “reading with the thumb.” Bearing in mind that the paper used for inserted prints would often be slightly thicker, and that some title pages were sufficiently allusive as to the kind of visual material the book would contain, readers might have been eager to access the images quickly by using their thumbs. By sensing the thickness of the paper with the inserted print so as to rush into the anticipated delights of the lascivious scenes identified as from the title page, the reception of the text with images, fused with the pleasures of a heated imagination, perhaps even augmented by the smell of the print or the freshly bound sheets, could then form an ideal chemical compound for the actual moment to stimulate the brain, and let all these sensations mingle and spread across the body. But in spite of such an exhilarating combination that may have brought the reader to the height of his fancy — allegedly so for a male readership — the engraving fails to prove successful in many regards. For all its pornographic rendering facing an otherwise mildly eroticised but subtly amusing text, the humour of which is underscored by Toby’s solipsistic ending of Trim’s evocative account, sexual innuendo, triggered by the combination of senses, remains more effective in text than in image. While thumbs may indeed spice up the act of reading, itself supplemented by racy images so as to increase the power of visuality, the blind search for such prints involves a specific kind of tactility, and, paradoxically, one that precludes reading the text. In practice, the text comes second after the images. By doing so, touch undermines the presence and impact of other senses such as sight for instance, and thus reduces the very possibility of more than one meaning emerging from the text. Conversely this kind of touch may be supplemented by, say, smell. This is yet another argument in favour of Van Sant’s centrality of touch though broached from a material culture angle. Most importantly, once the image is revealed, the reader may well feel more dissatisfied than if a stretch of *terra incognita* of ambivalence had been laid open before his eyes, in particular one that would have offered freedom of interpretation as opposed to a preconceived framing and prepackaged determinacy.

CONCLUSION

Despite the competence of some artists to convey either pathos or entertaining bawdiness, prints seem to suffer from a chronic inability to render the ambivalence and the playfulness of Sterne’s texts, precisely because of the complex task set by the author’s agenda, which is to fully acknowledge the roles played by mind and body; in other words, the senses, motion, sensations and a complex range of emotions. Sterne could deflect the reader’s attention to the body precisely by instilling a discourse on default, fragility, frequently teetering on the cusp of parody and mild derision. There are fragments in

Sterne's fiction that strike the chord of a *via media* somewhere between books to be read with one hand and instruction manuals for "Men (and Women) of Feeling," however ambivalent the term "feeling" may be. Most of those that have been explored do contain elements of wavering that are enhanced by pendularity, in one form or another. They also belong to the sections of Sterne's fiction in which, as McKeon put it, "sexuality saturates men of feeling with the sensible vibrations of a thoroughly sublimated lubricity" (McKeon 672). Synaesthetic effects in Sterne's fiction comprise a variety of metaphoric games, but as long as the rhetoric prevails, language foregrounds the complex accretion of senses. In a bigger picture, Kickel's concept of cross-modal experience (Kickel 93) fits as one facet, but it does not take into account the humour which underpins the whole scheme.

If, on the contrary, both pendular pattern scenes and those featuring aposiopetic moments are construed as forming part of an array of devices used for comical purposes, then the presence of the senses can equate with a heuristic process of making sense. Furthermore, depending on the level of contact in the book, and with the book, an enquiry into evidence of synaesthesia requires engaging with the text as a narrative of motion and emotional pressure, as well as with the book as an object, in particular the type of tactility involved in the actual manipulation of the book. Sterne's synaesthetics links the bound book as a vehicle for thought and creativity to the circulation of print in its materiality and the book as a commodity. When passages both from *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* are read so that their multisensory facets come fully to be appreciated, they are mimed, acted out, read aloud and possibly transposed into another medium. While Kickel's analysis hinges on synaesthetic metaphors, I would argue that Sterne goes beyond metaphors by resorting to a complex arrangement of scenes that may be heard, viewed, imagined and ultimately appropriated in a very individual manner in order "to feel *beyond* ourselves" (Chandler 25). In that respect I would rather side with Goring and Tadié, who both separately argue that theatricality and eloquence are the foundation of Sterne's system of representation. Such a system may, however, include external parameters, as, say, a privately commissioned binding or *curiosa*, in the case of the Amsterdam edition.

In spite of a potentially large number of interpretative values, images cannot render the complexity of a scene that incorporates either *tactus interruptus* or the pendular pattern because by essence they over-prioritise vision and lack the plasticity implied by Sterne's text and sub-text, something which can only be compensated either by animation, or imaginary scenarios formed in the reader's mind. These images therefore fail to convey the transgression game inherent to Sternean fiction, his fictionalised "friction," thus the humour its haptic eye encapsulates. "There is little knowledge to be got from mere words" says Tristram pointing towards Locke, and, sometimes, there is not much more to be got from images either. There may however be something to gain from looking differently at Sterne's

fiction, as “there is no understanding of the text without the senses and the textual understanding might itself be thought of as a sense” (Denham 116). Fictionalised objects (a handkerchief, a glove, a purse) or animals (a goat) and the complex experience induced by staging specific parts of the body (the wrist, the knee), to which reading with the thumb may add more voltage, all these contribute to emphasising the original multisensory spectrum of the text. To some extent, they may all be perceived as constructing an afterlife of a primal fictionalised experience. But, most importantly, they constantly, and consistently, remind us that life, opinions and fictional journeys are made of sensations, emotions and what Hume (*Treatise* 493) described as “uncompounded and inseparable” motions.⁹

⁹ This essay is dedicated to all the Sterne scholars and friends who have been supportive and have kindly taken the time to discuss this complex topic with me, from its inception to the final proofreading, in the spirit of True Shandyism.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1 Rowland Wheelwright, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (London: G. Harrap, 1926). (Private collection)
- Fig. 2 *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. San Francisco, Arion Press, 1988. photo-collage by John Baldessari. (Private collection).
- Fig. 3 Anonymous mezzotint captioned "I seiz'd her hand". *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. (British Library PC31g21).