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Time and the Wound in *Tristram Shandy*: the sense of a quest

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ABSTRACT. To what extent does *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* still make sense at the beginning of the 21st century? We certainly understand Laurence Sterne's novel differently from his contemporaries. Two centuries and a half have elapsed. Our cultural heritage is different from theirs, as are our reading habits. Today one is often tempted to compare *Tristram Shandy* with Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. We also consider that Sterne shares a large number of theoretical similarities with French philosopher Henri Bergson (who influenced Proust). Maybe we should remember that one of Bergson's key concepts was based on an opposition between time and duration, an opposition which is already present in John Locke's *Essay Upon Human Understanding* and explicitly taken up in Sterne's book. Are we right when we look upon *Tristram Shandy* as an experimental work whose subject matter is time? Just like Proust's fictional autobiography, the novel seems to be a quest. Just like *Remembrance* too, *Tristram Shandy* is (paradoxically) not about the past. It is a book with an obsession for the future. Indeed, the way Sterne experiments when he produces his associations between the past and the present (indeed when he creates a fictional past in order to make a future possible) is very close to what French philosopher Gilles Deleuze called crystals of time. At bottom, the crucial question is probably: why do we have to experiment with time? Sterne's answer is clear: it is because of what could be called the wound, which is not (only) an accident, but also an event, that is a concept that forces us to think and helps us produce meaning.

Does Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*¹ still make sense to 21st century's readers? Roughly 250 years have elapsed since its author published volume IX. Our societies have changed. So have our reading habits and more generally our contact with reality. A great many books of fiction have appeared since the 18th Century, they constitute our common culture and they obviously influence the way we react to *Tristram Shandy*. Maybe today one possible approach to the novel is to address what could be called questions of cultural perception. To what sort of tradition do we appeal when we try to read *Tristram Shandy*? It seems for instance tempting to look upon Sterne as some kind of physician. He certainly doesn't spare us his own bodily misfortunes, without forgetting Uncle Toby's wound. More generally, society also seems to be diseased in the pages of the novel. It is almost as if for Sterne writing meant assembling symptoms.²[bookmark2](#) He offers his readers a collection of all that is wrong in his family and the world at large. It is then up to them to interpret these signs, come up with a diagnosis and possibly suggest remedies. Such an approach seems to

¹ As there are so many different editions of Laurence Sterne's novel, providing page references seems completely useless. References will be to volumes et chapters.

² I am referring to Gilles Deleuze's pronouncements when he explains that writers are (like) physicians. See his *Essays Critical and Clinical*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, especially the first chapter, "Literature and Life." Deleuze briefly gives some examples: Herman Melville's "Bartleby," Thomas Wolfe, Franz Kafka, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, etc. The term 'diagnosis' means collecting symptoms and establishing distinctions between them (*dia*) and then producing a body of knowledge (*gnosis*) that can later be used critically in order to enhance life. Following Deleuze in this respect, my claim is that, among other functions, literature helps us discover for ourselves new possibilities to relate to myself, others and, if one chooses to believe in it, to transcendent entities.

be justified, as Laurence Sterne was more than just a novelist (and a physician in his own way...). He certainly was a clergyman (with occasionally most unorthodox ideas, at least when one looks at the implications that can be derived from some passages of the novel...) He also liked philosophy. He was especially fond of Locke, whom he quotes (and betrays) several times in his book. He associated with Hume quite often in the salons of the Encyclopédistes in Paris and he certainly was perfectly aware of the empiricist concepts put forward by him. There is no doubt that *Tristram Shandy* is among other things an ambitious philosophical book which is extremely different from all the other novels that had appeared in England during the first half of the 18th century.

One consequence is that we intuitively feel that Sterne's book is 'modern.' That word admittedly doesn't mean much. At the very least, it implies that we should never take anything for granted, and that there are no easy ready-made solutions to our problems. Reality is always in a state of crisis. In other words, there are no happy endings. There are no dénouements. Only knots and problems — and time never stops. More specifically, *Tristram Shandy* is a special book at the very least for three reasons. First, it raises one important question: can we have an identity without a wound? The wound is something that produces 'events.' "Event" implies meaning, that is to say that it is the advent of something for us. (*Eventus* meant *result* in Latin). Today, we read Sterne after Gilles Deleuze who developed a theory of the 'event,' with the help of intuitions he adapted from the 3rd Century BC Greek Stoics. Deleuze secondly (coincidence?) re-discovered the conception of time produced by the Stoics which shares a number of characteristics with that of Bergson, who (exactly like Walter Shandy...) borrowed from John Locke the opposition between time and duration. Finally, Sterne intuited that relationships are arbitrary (should we say the way signs are arbitrary for Ferdinand de Saussure?) In plain English, that means that the links between words and things are not direct.³ We no longer believe that exists a God who guarantees the connection between language and the world. The Reverend Laurence Sterne seems to have been a most unorthodox parson...

the time is out of joint

In order to understand the questions Sterne raises in his novel, it is essential to look first at the way he experiments with the structure of his book. Experiment is clearly the correct word. Sterne's work represents a complete break with the novelistic techniques of the first half of the 18th Century. It is as if he had discovered that there have always been two conceptions of time and consequently he adopts the one that is usually overlooked. Hence, the break his book shows with such bestsellers as the great novels by Crusoe, Richardson or Fielding. This basic opposition goes back at least to the Stoics who distinguished between Chronos (chronological time) and another view of time which they called Aiôn.⁴ To some extent, John Locke also posits a partly similar difference between (outside, quantitative, chronological) time and (inner, qualitative) duration.⁵ The difference will not be lost on Sterne and, later, through Bergson's *Matière et mémoire* (1896), it will be once more conceptualized by Gilles Deleuze in his 1969 *Logique du sens*, and then in the two volumes of *Cinéma: L'Image-mouvement* and *L'Image-temps*.

³ That is something Trim intuitively knows. "[...] had my name been *Alexander*, I could have done no more at *Namur* than my duty. (IV/XVIII).

⁴ The word 'Aiôn' is often translated into English by 'eternity.' It certainly is an anachronism if by 'eternity' we envision some sort of Christian otherworld. The way the Stoics looked at problems was purely immanent, and we should bear in mind that in our age returning to the Stoics has usually coincided with a desire to avoid all forms of transcendence.

⁵ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 2, Chapter XIV.

It should perhaps be noted that the shift from *Movement-Time* to *Image-Time* coincides with the end of the Second World War, as if the 20th Century was divided in its middle just like the 18th. Sterne undeniably adopts a conception of time that is not chronological. Can we determine how far he goes in constructing time in a way we would probably today call crystal-like, to use Deleuze's phrase? Sterne is simply not interested in a certain type of literary tradition, as is of course perfectly obvious even at a first reading of the novel. To some extent, we could almost say that Sterne is the 18th Century's Marcel Proust. Both men experiment with time and identity in a roughly similar manner. Put in a nutshell, Sterne doesn't believe in the stability of reality. For him, it is most unlikely that self or world were given once and for all. In a sense, Tristram Shandy is the complete opposite of Tom Jones, to limit ourselves to a single example. Tom possesses an essence and Fielding's novel relates the discovery of that essence. Its hero perceives — correctly or not — situations, obstacles, and then he reacts to them, and thus acts. What matters is always what is achieved next. Indeed, the plot of the novel lists a series of items Tom lacks, and, at the end of the book, he is in full possession of his rightful name, identity, house, fortune, etc. He also enjoys social recognition and of course he has gained a wife, love, and happiness. It also goes without saying that his children will perpetuate his name. Tristram reaches none of these things at the end of Sterne's book. Indeed, at least on one point, the ending of Sterne's book is perfectly clear: Tristram is a problem. He never understands the present situation. He never really acts. The only possibility for him is to keep running away. We don't even know where he physically is, apart from the fact that he has been given some sort of hospitality near Toulouse in the South of France where he is in the course of writing volume VII of his book. We only know that he is (still) alive. Barely... He no longer has a home. Exile is the only world the adult Tristram knows. Sterne unquestionably refuses to write a novel, which describes the discovery of a hidden truth. For him, neither our bodies, nor our identity are stable. The same is true of space, objects, and more generally, of society and history which are just as problematic. Bergson (or Hume?) would explain that Tom Jones relies on 'habits.' He possesses an intuitive advance knowledge of what he has to connect in order to achieve a result. Tristram Shandy just doesn't know what comes next. In fact, he rarely looks towards the future. When he does, it is to try and ward off death. On the contrary, he plunges into the past. He does so in a completely non-teleological manner

Tristram is a latter-day Hamlet. Time, identity, manhood, and meaning elude him. Sterne's novel can thus be read as a quest. The narrator needs the dimension of the past in order to know who he is (to construct himself?), and yet the reader who finishes the book only knows that Tristram hasn't found himself. The past in fact is pure hypothesis. Basically, the narrator embarks on a quest for his identity, a notion which for him is supposed to be synonymous with his conception. If he could find the truth about it, he would at last know who he is. The quest, however, never stops. Finding the truth would obviously mean the end of the book. We know that the book doesn't end, or rather that it ends without a revelation (or more accurately that it ends because of the death of the author who was only able to write nine volumes). The quest does not succeed because we are inside the mind of the narrator and as his thoughts proceed by means of associations of ideas (more specifically, by similarity or contiguity). It follows that the book remains entirely subjective. Sterne found the notion of association of ideas in Book XIX of *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1690 by John Locke who, to say the least, objected to the whole process, arguing that it was subjective and not necessarily a faithful reflexion of outside reality. On the contrary, Sterne loved the notion. For instance, in volume one, asking himself questions about his conception leads Sterne's

narrator to think of midwives, which in turn leads him to Parson Yorrick — who established the local midwife in order to avoid killing his horses when he had to go and fetch a distant midwife —, and then to the parson's horse, then to Don Quixote's Rosinante, then the theoretical question of hobby horses, etc. In a famous passage (II/2), Walter Shandy summarizes Locke's book for Uncle Toby: "It is a history-book [...] of what passes in a man's own mind." This notion was obviously very important for Sterne. We should however probably note that referring to Locke was perhaps not absolutely necessary. The Greek quotation by Epictetus in the frontispice of Volume I expresses roughly the same idea: "We are tormented by the opinions we have of things, not by things themselves." The problem for Tristram is to discover what caused his conception. Can I move from cause to cause and in the end discover the primal cause? The whole quest is an illusion. The narrator knows it, and yet he pursues his unending quest. The very first paragraph of the book is perfectly clear in this respect when the narrator describes the homunculus (coming from his father and supposedly containing his essence to which the mother will only give warmth and food.) For unforeseeable reasons, and the irruption of chance, the homunculus and the accompanying animal spirits lose their way and are unable to maintain a straight line.⁶ They create a new "garden-walk" and "the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it." The father is then lead to ask the revealing question, "Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?" Is then the primal cause to be found in Genesis? In fact, readers soon discover that there is no answer. There is only chaos which is associated with women, Eve or Mrs. Shandy, who destroy patriarchal certainties. The question referred to in the father's pronouncement is one of the most famous quotations of English literature, together with Hamlet's "The time is out of joint." Curiously enough, the two quotations are synonymous. The mother destroys chronological time, that is to say what is common known as clock time. As the Stoics would say, when we leave the stability of Chronos, we lose ourselves in Aiôn.

It should of course not be forgotten that the first paragraph is pure comedy. Sterne pokes fun at traditional medieval medicine. The rest of the novel, however, is extremely serious. Aiôn is a serious business. What Sterne has discovered is that it is in his quest that the subject acquires his existence. Identity is never given. Let us forget about the homunculus, which was just some sort of pseudo-platonic myth, in the same way as innate ideas were beginning to be looked upon them as illusions as well. Sterne is a man of the 18th Century. Locke was probably the first important voice to delineate the idea of empiricism, but it took more than half a century for empiricism to assert its power and develop its implications. Locke's ideas in fact had to wait for Hume and for Sterne, each of them in their own domain, for their ultimate consequences to become clear. Moreover, identity is always open, never final, as human beings are caught in processes of becoming. A man will never find his 'true' self. Such a thing never exists. Only the quest is real. In fact, only people who do not change have fixed identities. They are fools or mad people, like Uncle Toby with his hobby-horse, or Tristram's father with his hypotheses, or indeed the mad Maria at the end of volume VII who has no identity at all. Laurence Sterne knows very well that real identity is the contrary of repetition. It is change, constant invention, new perceptions of ourselves and the world, and the ability to move from one plane to another.

⁶ John Freeman's paper on the dynamics of genre is always well worth returning to on the discomfiture of the homunculus (and more generally of patriarchy).

the relations are out of joint

Sterne intuited what Marcel Proust rediscovered more than one century and a half later: the way memory really works. In the famous episode of the ‘madeleine,’ which provides the theory behind *Remembrance of Things Past*, the narrator dips a biscuit in a cup of tea, and he is suddenly reminded of Combray, the small village where he was a child and where he used to eat the same ‘madeleines’ soaked in tea. He explains that suddenly, in a split second, Combray was present before his eyes as it never was. It is thus not a memory. It is an image produced by the imagination. It follows that the past is actually part of the present. The present chooses elements from the past and gives them meaning, context, relevance, etc. Proust probably did not need to read Henri Bergson’s *Matière et mémoire* where similar ideas are expounded. He knew very well that consciousness is a mixture of past and present, and that consciousness never stops producing new arrangements of past and present. Our identity (if we assume that we possess one and for want of a better word) is only our consciousness. It is certainly not some sort of eternal essence which we hope we will be able to unveil one day. In addition, consciousness is always changing. Sterne’s narrator also knows all that. He is not concerned with the past, but with the present, or — if one prefers — with building a tentative identity including what little future he has at his disposal. He plunges into the past in order to build that identity. Sterne’s conception of time is pure Lockean (and Bergsonian) duration, and thus it is very close to the Stoics’ *Aiôn*. He surely would have understood Proust’s definition of the past which he calls the ‘virtual.’ Proust explains that it is “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.” My past coincides with that ‘virtual’ which my consciousness develops.⁷ Gilles Deleuze is fond of mentioning in his books that quotation by Proust, which he often paraphrases in the following way: memory is not inside ourselves; we are inside memory. In this respect, a philosopher like Deleuze is essential for us today because he tried to be an entirely empiricist thinker. Indeed his first full length book was devoted to David Hume. Throughout his career, Deleuze remained faithful to empiricism, probably because it is a philosophy that is

⁷ Maybe it is essential that we should re-read Marcel Proust in order to discover the most illuminating series of concepts that will help us to understand the function of the past in *Tristram Shandy*. It is of course true that the structure of Proust’s book is extremely close to that of *Tristram Shandy*. Proust calls the past the ‘virtual.’ He says that it is “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.” Perception (that is, for our purpose here, consciousness) is made up of a series of exchanges between the ‘virtual’ (all my past) and the ‘actual,’ that is to say the present, what is given, presented to me. Both the virtual and the actual are just as real. The present calls forth elements from the virtual and the virtual influences our relationship with the present. The past of course is not actual. What is more important, it is not ‘abstract.’ In other words, it is not something transcendent, it doesn’t belong to some mysterious other world. There is only one world, and Proust’s conception is entirely immanent, just like that of Bergson who also calls the past the virtual and shows that the interplay of past and present (of the virtual and of the actual, if one prefers) produces continuous series of differentiations that lead to the creation of new perceptions (at subsequently of production of our personal identity). Proust writes, “But let a noise or a scent, once heard or smelt, be heard or smelt again in the present and at the same time in the past, *real without being actual, ideal without being abstract*, and immediately the permanent and habitually concealed essence of things is liberated and our true self which seemed — had perhaps for long years seemed — to be dead but was not altogether dead, is awakened and reanimated as it receives the celestial nourishment that is brought to it. A minute freed from the order of time has re-created in us, to feel it, the man freed from the order of time. And one can understand that this man should have confidence in his joy, even if the simple taste of a madeleine does not seem logically to contain within it the reasons for this joy, one can understand that the word ‘death’ should have no meaning for him; situated outside time, why should he fear the future?” *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1983, vol. 3, 905-906.). Proust, who never appears to mention Sterne’s Book, would have been a perfect reader of *Tristram Shandy*. He would have understood where the problem exactly is. He knew that what matters is not the origins of our memories (which are part of chronological time), but duration, that is the present which is always split, divided, that is to say that it is made up of the heterogenous assemblage of past elements and of present elements enabling us to face our future.

entirely immanent and that doesn't require any innate essences or transcendental other worlds. Sterne would have agreed with Locke, when he paraphrases his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Cf. Locke's *Essay*: III/5/16) in order to refuse to let himself be drawn into specious considerations about 'essences,' 'quintessences,' or 'substances' (II/2). Everything without exceptions is constructed by the mind. Deleuze actually kept repeating that Hume's greatest discovery was that there are only relationships, or rather that relationships are more important than the elements which they connect. William James and Bertrand Russell will of course rediscover that crucial point. Hume generalized Locke's theory according to which the mind functions only by means of associations of ideas and he liberated that theory from the limits Locke timidly imposed upon it.⁸ The subject is what goes beyond what is given by his senses and, in the process, constitutes himself as a fiction. As Deleuze explains (in his native French), the way we think is by connecting events not by the word "*est*" (is, to be), but by "*et*" (and). (The fact that the two words are pronounced in exactly the same way in French certainly helps...).⁹ "*Est*" implies being, essences, which means that reality is something that is already written, and that we only have to discover these so-called essences. "*Et*," on the other hand, is a word that indicates empiricist operations. It implies operations of additions and corresponds to an open-ended conception of time which flows into the future. Could Deleuze be describing Sterne's style, or more generally the way the mind of his narrator works? *Tristram Shandy* is first and foremost a book made up of digressions. The narrator never knows what his goal will be. Put differently, the very traditional conception of time one finds in a novelist like Fielding is based on the (family) tree. The 'hero' has to reconstruct the tree and find its root in order to recover his origin (that is to say his identity) that had always been present hidden "behind" or "under" the book. On the contrary, Sterne's narrator will never go anywhere. He will multiply digressions, and..., and..., and... In his case, there is no tree, but rather there is what Deleuze would call a rhizome, which proliferates in all directions in a horizontal and heterogeneous manner.

Henri Bergson pointed out that clock time was homogeneous and always divisible and regular, whereas duration is heterogeneous; it has no unity, and grows like a rhizome. Duration encompasses elements which belong to several areas of our past and temporarily connects them. In the same manner, the Stoic *Aiôn* has no beginning and no ending. It is completely non-teleological. You are always in the middle of something. Sterne's narrator would certainly say that you never proceed along straight lines, you move "forwards" and "backwards" at the same time. (See for instance VIII/1.) That is another way of saying that the present and the past are always being connected and separated. At the same time, meaning is produced. A consequence of that is that meaning is purely immanent: it is an association between two elements. Sterne almost develops a whole philosophy about what he very perceptively knew the twofold dimension of his book was. "By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too, and at the same time." (I/XXII).

Perhaps the best way of understanding what Sterne is trying to do is look at the short Chapter XXVII of volume VII of *Tristram Shandy*. The passage is written in the

⁸ Howard Anderson's article on wit and associationism offers a very convincing study of the manner in which Laurence Sterne creatively develops a number of concepts he found in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, releasing their revolutionary potentialities and then going beyond them.

⁹ *Dialogues avec Claire Parnet*. See the chapter "De la supériorité de la littérature anglaise-américaine," especially p. 70.

present. The narrator is alone, apparently near Toulouse, France, fleeing death in a sort of (self-imposed?) exile, and in the process of writing the book called *Tristram Shandy*. “[...] I am this moment walking across the market-place of Auxerre with my father and my uncle Toby, on our way back from dinner — and I am this moment also entering Lyons with my post-chaise broke into a thousand pieces — and I am moreover this moment in a handsome pavillion built by Pringello, upon the banks of the Garonne, which Mons. Sligniac has lent me, and where I am now rhapsodising all these affairs.” Deleuze would have called the systems of relations produced here a crystal of time.¹⁰ At the beginning of the chapter, the narrator speaks of a ‘skein.’ These two notions (crystal and skein) seem extremely similar. In this case, time has three facets (or three strands of wool twisted one upon the other). No level of time is superior to the others. You need Auxerre and Lyons to understand the Garonne and the present. The reverse is also true. Why do these three places look the same to the narrator? What seems to be suggested is that in each case he goes through a frontier, entering a city, or crossing it, or writing his book and thus creating new meaning. Writing is seen as synonymous with a journey, which, in its turn, is synonymous with life. The skein/crystal produces the meaning. Crossing a border is indeed like receiving a wound. It is physical. As far as the wound is concerned, there is obviously the difference in my body before and after the wound. My destiny during the rest of my life will be to make sense of the wound, connect it to something else, in the same way as the narrator connects the three cities which are no longer physical realities, but parts of an idea, or, as he puts it, parts of a “rhapsody.” Indeed, as the writer says immediately before the previous quotation, he is afforded “a certain degree of perfection.” Similarly, when the adult narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past* tasted his madeleine dunked in tea, he all of a sudden experienced a feeling of “joy,” as if he had then just received the revelation of his existence and the vision of a fictitious Combray that provided a meaning to his life. Marcel was aware that he was the victim of time (Chronos), that he had begun to reach old age, that his body was slowly deteriorating. That fictitious mixture of past and present gave him a stable image of himself. It also gave him the desire to write a book: *Remembrance of Things Past*... Here, meaning is a mental event that is accompanied with a new perception of self and world: I cross a frontier, move to another level, and embark upon new enterprises.

That seems to be the main discovery of the book. There is no ultimate truth. There are only temporary arrangements of relations (or associations, if one prefers) inside our consciousness. The elements that make up these assemblages (ie. the virtual) are what precisely what constitutes us. They become actualized depending on our present context. Together, these assemblages of past and present constitute our current self, and it is a self that is never complete. It is always in transition. Tristram’s journey doesn’t stop at Toulouse...

The fact that there is no truth symbolically explains why Tristram could not be named Trismegistus. Readers know that such was his father’s desire. However, a desire is — by definition... — only a desire. As usual, Walter believes that his superior status as a man, husband and father gives him special rights. Trismegistus was another

¹⁰ Deleuze offers his theory of time crystals in Chapter 4 of *Cinéma 2: L’Image-Temps*. Here again, Deleuze develops a number of ideas borrowed from Henri Bergson, in this case mainly from *Matière et mémoire*. The past is created at the same time as the present, which means that the present is always split and twofold: it is partly past and partly projection towards the future. In other words, we would be unable to make sense of the present without the past that is inside our minds. Conversely, the past could not exist if it was not caught in a process of exchange with the present. Bergson explains that the past in us is in fact what he calls a “pure past” which has nothing to do with a series of memories (which would belong to Chronos, or chronological time). The past is a construction. It belongs to the present. Crystal time is that heterogeneous, multifaceted arrangement.

name for the Egyptian Thoth, the god who invented writing and who is associated with Truth (with a capital T).¹¹ Ironically, in the novel, women (chaos?) see to it that, when the baby is baptised, he is given a name that is a shortened version of Trismegistus. The lesson of this episode seems to be that there is no whole, but only partial meanings, limited viewpoints, isolated crystals of time. That is what the whole book is about: a quest for truth and origins that leads nowhere, or rather, that leads to a multiplicity of places and that never stops. Man's estate is synonymous with exile, that is to say exile from truth, home, and his body. As a matter of fact, the book also charts the way the narrator's body slowly disintegrates. In the same way as he lost part of his intended name, he lost part of his nose, he then lost part of his penis, then part of his lungs, and of course his virility too. We know today that signifiers are arbitrary. That also applies to names. No-one will ever be Trismegistus and embody total knowledge. Tristram is an approximation. It certainly means 'triste.' Is that the reason why Tristram runs away to France? Is that also the reason why he occasionally imagines that he is not the legitimate son of his father? Was he predestined to be a bastard because Walter was so lazy that he did not have the bend sinister on the family's carriage corrected? A sad and sinister fate, such seems to be Tristram's fate, away from wholeness and certainties. Life for him means looking for an origin he will never find and running away from a death that will one day catch up with him.

what is a thigh out of joint?

The book is a quest for meaning. Very quickly, it appears that the origin, the primal cause if one prefers, is an accident. In other words, it is basically meaningless. Yet, one cannot not keep returning to it, and try building meaning around it. The quest is endless and only death will stop it. The book's central accident is the wound.¹² It is first something that happened to Toby's body. Obviously, there were material causes, a shell, part of wall, etc., but these contingent causes are finally irrelevant when it comes to determine the importance of the wound for the uncle. It shapes his whole life. At the beginning, when he returns to England, it is precisely its absence of meaning that makes him ill. He temporarily recovers when he is able, as it were, to stabilise his wound thanks to the model cities he builds one after the other in the bowling-green. When the war ends and he is no longer able to replay in his garden the battles that took place on the Continent, the disease returns. That time, the wound is embodied by the widow Wadman's desire, which kindles his own desire. It is admittedly not a physical disease as he discovers when the blister on his thighs disappears. It is a disease all the same which engulfs all his consciousness. He (apparently?) never recovers from it. Uncle Toby simply vanishes from the book.

The wound thus becomes a concept and it becomes part of a tradition of interpretation. The wound enables readers to make sense of a book. It possesses two main characteristics. First, it gets people to use language, to ask themselves questions, to produce interpretations. Secondly, one is tempted to say that the wound is contagious and that it disseminates. It certainly throughout the pages of *Tristram Shandy*. The father is a deeply unhappy man who feels that his family is slowly being destroyed. Was not in his case the wound the fact that the Aunt Dinah had a child with her coachman and

¹¹ MacKenzie in his 2005 paper very clearly shows that Sterne's novel is divided between a quest for plenitude in the past — a quest which cannot but fail, as plenitude no more exists in this world than someone called Trismegistus — and a flight ahead into the future in order to try to escape the inescapable, that is death.

¹² The title of Ross King's article "*Tristram Shandy* and the Wound of Language" sounds extremely promising. The author strangely does not develop the concept of wound. It could however be argued that Sterne is part of a long tradition which places what could be called the wound at the origin of literature.

then married him? Walter feels that she destroyed for ever the aristocratic pretensions of the Shandy family. The accident that cannot be explained was of course at first physical. (What happened one unspecified day between the coachman and the aunt?...) It then became something mental. It could perhaps be suggested that it is in the nature of a 'crack-up.'¹³ A fissure is slowly bringing about the fall the House of Shandy... The Uncle's wound also contaminates his nephew's body and mind. It explains why Tristram has to write his book, adding volume to volume, in an unrelenting attempt to find the resting point that will give meaning to his life. The wound is always a question of meaning. And the wound is not in the past. It is in the future. Or, rather, the (meaningless) accident was in the past. But the meaning will be in the future, perhaps, one day... The wound is waiting for me. At bottom, the wound has nothing to do with any kind of regression. On the contrary, it implies the structure of a quest. I will only know what my identity is when I find it, it will then be a new birth for me. More specifically, as far as temporal problems are concerned, the wound is never in the present. It leads from the past to an unspecified future. *Tristram Shandy* is about birth. Birth, however, always eludes the narrator. Everybody knows that he postpones telling us about his birth, not because he was not born. We of course know that, just like you and me, he was born. The real problem is that he needs to be born in the novel. In other words, it is a question of meaning, not of bodies. It also has to do with his desire to try and stop time, end his exile, ward off death. Finding the meaning of the wound would signify being granted some kind of revelation: seeing something that is stable and motionless in the inexorable flow of time. The quest is of course an illusion. But Tristram, however, cannot not cherish that hope, and it is precisely that hope which fundamentally underpins the structure of the novel.

Tristram in the 21st century? There are obviously other ways of reading Laurence Sterne's novel. There have indeed been countless interpretations of it since it was published. Every one of them consciously or not stressed a tradition, a way of selecting and ordering components from the book. This paper is only a proposal for our time. Other readers and/or critics may prefer insisting on other textual 'skeins.' It claims to be original in so far as it asks: how immanent can one be? If one considers that the 20th century mainly digested the intuitions offered by thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, can now one offer a non idealistic, non- Platonic version of *Tristram*? In other words (and as a tentative conclusion), speaking about Sterne leads us to posit that the problem of reading is basically philosophical.

There is always more than one way of reading. When one starts reading a text, one immediately enters a tradition. Plato? The problem is that there are at least two ways of reading Plato... He is usually placed in an idealistic tradition. On the other hand, one may remember passages like the following from *Republic*: "This was what I meant when I spoke of impressions which invited the intellect or the reverse — those which are simultaneous with opposite impressions invite thought; those which are not

¹³ Our lives are always caught in processes of becoming. We are not necessarily conscious of it, but we are changing all the time. What happens when you become conscious of change? In 1936, the American novelist Francis Scott Fitzgerald relates what that event represented for him in a brief essay, *The Crack-up*. What were the causes of the 'crack-up'? In fact, in his case, there are so many of them that they no longer matter: alcoholism and the deterioration of his body, the economic crisis of the 30s, etc. What is important is that a series of tiny fissures (meaningless in themselves) end up one day producing a rupture, that is to say an event situated in my consciousness. There are then two possibilities open to me. Either I ignore the change and go on living (not a very good word... surviving?) in a fossilized manner (like Toby or Walter), or I cross the frontier, I develop a new identity, I invest new territories, I run away in another direction. For it undeniably will have to be a flight away from my former certainties which have proved to be illusions. (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari analyse Fitzgerald's essay in Chapter 8 of *Mille Plateaux*.)

simultaneous do not.” (Book VII, Jowette, 1901, 220). We think because we have undergone a shock, a trauma — mental and/or physical. The wound, the encounter, chance, violence come first. Our minds then try to produce meaning in order to account for contradictory perceptions. It follows that we can distinguish two kinds of hermeneutics. The first is based on the principle of anamnesis. It aims at recognition: the text we are reading is to be connected to something already constructed, a world of ideas, models, truths, essences... The second hermeneutics is on the contrary non teleological. Its objective is cognition, not recognition. In this case, readers use their memory, but they do so in order to develop as yet unwritten bodies of knowledge which they project into the future.

Literature is about meaning. Its function is not to describe reality, that is ‘mixtures of bodies,’ as the Stoics would put it. A wound is mixture of two bodies, mine and the fragment of rock sent flying by a shell in the battle of Namur. In itself, the wound is meaningless. Gilles Deleuze would maintain that it is an accident, not an ‘event,’ another Stoic concept. An event is something that endlessly being produced in the present. It requires the past (the accident) in order to make sense of it, and conversely the past needs the present to exist. Such could be a definition of literature. For Deleuze, the perfect model who afforded us the theory we need to talk about literature was the French poet Joë bousquet. He was a soldier in World War I when he received a wound that left paralysed on his bed in Carcassonne until his death in 1950. Bousquet wrote poems to go beyond that wound which had enabled him to construct his identity. “I was born to embody the wound,” (*Les Capitales*, 103) he said, adding that it “beckoned” to him.

Today, we read Sterne through Proust, or Proust through Sterne. We also read Sterne through a multitude of other texts. We read him, for instance, Hemingway, and vice versa. Isn't *The Sun Also Rises* a modern version of *Tristram Shandy* to limit myself to a perhaps somewhat shocking and unexpected example? The novel's narrator, Jake Barnes, writes because he was wounded during the war. He is caught in an unbearable contradiction. Clearly, he is both sexually impotent and in love with a woman. If we limit ourselves to what the book says, his wound is just as mysterious as Uncle Toby's. His problem is to make sense of it. Hemingway's novel too is radically non teleological. The narrator does not know where he is going. He has no models to follow, he makes mistakes, he regrets them, and the book ends with what he feels is a most unsatisfying balance. He also reminds us that Jake is short for Jacob. Isn't Jacob Tristram Shandy's ancestor as well as Jake Barnes's? Jacob also made mistakes, he was dishonest, he led a life of exile without goal. One day, he met the angel. (A man? God? Whoever he met is irrelevant). He discovered his true identity, his mission: he will invent a completely different future and his descendants will write the history of the Jews. Like Saul who became Paul, Jacob received a new name: Israel. He also received a wound: “and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint” (Genesis: 32 :28). Much ink has been spilled upon this verse. Whatever one's interpretive choice, one thing is essential: the wound has to remain mysterious and it must be highly symbolic (and most likely connected with the groin...) Jacob, Toby, Tristram, Jake... Meaning is only produced because first there was the wound.

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