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Review of Jens Martin Gurr, Tristram Shandy and the Dialectic of Enlightenment.

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Jens Martin Gurr, *Tristram Shandy and the Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1999. 179 pp. ISBN 3825309274.

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Begun as a doctoral dissertation, this study still bears the marks of its origin. Mr. Gurr spends more time than necessary explaining his critical methods, reiterating his central arguments, and "positioning" his arguments in relation to current Sterne scholarship. Moreover, his methods of argumentation seem very thesis-driven, as he tries to draw critical conclusions more categorical and decisive than the equivocal nature of Sterne's fictions would seem to encourage. I have reservations about his conclusions, but let me for the moment stand out of the way of the arguments he develops, for there are useful critical ideas here and such energetic argumentation is often thought-provoking.

The principal aim of the study is to define and situate Sterne's "modernity" in *Tristram Shandy* in a way that respects his eighteenth-century origins while at the same time acknowledging some of his important anticipations of twentieth-century kinds of cultural modernity. To assist in this project Mr. Gurr borrows a central tenet from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1969), the idea that enlightened thought in any era tends to pervert itself by overrationalization and mechanization unless thinkers are continually alert to such dangers. It is this notion of the necessary doubleness of Enlightenment thought, at once enlightened and self-critical, that Mr. Gurr would use to understand Sterne. In *Tristram Shandy* specifically he sees "an admirably balanced critique of enlightened philosophy" (52).

Mr. Gurr sets the stage for his account of Sterne's novel with two background discussions which convey well both the intellectual excitement and the critical spirit of the Enlightenment. In the first he reviews English contributions to contemporary thinking about progress, paying particular attention to the role of hypothesis-making in the advancement of learning; Boyle and Locke thought that hypotheses played an important role in systematic investigation, whereas Newton minimized their significance. In the second he reviews the long-running English debate between pessimists like Hobbes and Mandeville who discounted the possibility of human generosity and altruism and relative optimists from Shaftesbury and Hutcheson to Smith and Hume who played up the "moral sense" of mankind and the consequent possibility of human benevolence.

Mr. Gurr's entry point into *Tristram Shandy* itself is Walter Shandy. Some of Walter's habits of mind seem consonant with the positive aspects of Enlightenment thinking--his enthusiasm for intellectual inquiry, his impatience with metaphysical speculation, his simple willingness to try new things--but Mr. Gurr reads him as a satiric portrayal of Enlightenment thinking gone seriously awry. Walter embodies a combination of excessive rationality, impracticality, unchecked hypothesizing, and old-fashioned pride who regularly disregards both the feelings and interests of other people, notably his wife and son. "Walter is the figure used to satirize very perceptively the excesses of an enlightened belief in reason, science, and progress which were beginning to become obvious in Sterne's day. . . He is an intellectual leveler unable to perceive distinctions not directly relevant to his immediate purpose, a totalitarian thinker prepared to instrumentalize and victimize human beings for the benefit of his theory" (74). In short, Walter is a picture of Enlightenment turned monstrous--and Mr. Gurr briefly compares him with the

enlightened planners who control the human "hatchery and conditioning" operations in Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Mr. Gurr is careful to ground this unsympathetic portrayal of Walter in textual particulars, and yet the resulting picture seems selective, humorless, and unduly narrow. It seems to me that he underestimates the range and complexity of potential responses to the outlook and character of Walter--Walter who is noble in his aspirations, pathetic in his failures and frustrations, and comic in his compulsive theorizing--so, at the very least, his monstrosity coexists in ironical suspension with many other aspects. Mr. Gurr's discussion suffers from a similar narrowness in the succeeding short chapter where he expands his argument to suggest that Tristram is victimized not just by his father, but by his entire family (plus Dr. Slop, Susannah the maid, and Corporal Trim), all of whom mean well by him but do not in fact do well by him.

The next two chapters deal with the experience and theme of reading in *Tristram Shandy*. Mr. Gurr argues that Tristram hopes to recuperate his misfortunes at the hands of his family by sharing a familiarity and friendship with his readers, then finds that most of his readers are incapable by reason of ignorance, interest, or incapacity of supplying that consolation. ". . . Tristram's readers are not only vulgar, uncooperative, and intent on demanding entertainment, but also decidedly malevolent. . . unwilling to have their ignorance, concupiscence, and other defects of mind exposed, they turn into aggressive and violent thugs. . ." (94). Mr. Gurr sees this supposed failure of relationship as a sign of a more general doubt on Sterne's part concerning the benevolist hopes of the Enlightenment.

From the idea that readers are unsuitable as friends it is a short jump to suppose that readers are really adversaries and the state of writing for the public is a state of war. Mr. Gurr quotes Tristram who is paraphrasing John de la Casse, Archbishop of Benevento: "... The life of a writer. . . was not so much a state of *composition*, as a state of *warfare*; and his probation in it, precisely that of any other man militant upon earth, --both depending alike, not half so much upon the degrees of his Wit--as his Resistance" (101). To the extent that an antagonistic relationship with readers is inevitable, writers need a reliable defense: Mr. Gurr interprets Tristram's elliptical and digressive style of story-telling as a defensive ploy designed to keep readers off balance and to challenge their assurance and complacency. Tristram purports to give his readers interpretive latitude, but his manner of presentation is assertive and quirkily coercive.

Mr. Gurr somewhat reverses his field in the next chapter when he discusses an analogy between Uncle Toby's military lore and Tristram's narrative technique. Toby learns that a cannonball does not fly on a direct line but on the arc of a parabola and Tristram learns to practice a similar art of indirection--partly by digressions, but also partly by "parabolic representations" which draw various characters into implicit comparisons, usually with himself. Mr. Gurr connects parabolas and parables--the Greek word for 'comparison' is the root of both--and praises Tristram for building improbable yet sound bridges of understanding between people. Tristram's control over the analogical bridges he builds protects him and also somewhat renews the Enlightenment faith in the systematic use of reason earlier reduced to shambles by Walter's arcane researches.

In a closing chapter Mr. Gurr circles back to Adorno, this time to *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970), to suggest that there is in fact a "politics" to *Tristram Shandy*. Adorno argued that art should not be easy and reassuring, for those qualities would reinforce the passivity and complacency of its audience and thereby strengthen the established makers of culture; instead art should be difficult, disturbing, and disruptive in order to stir its audience into full awareness of the world. Seen in this light, Tristram's activities of indirection and resistance to anybody's rules but his own--a deliberate creation of readerly difficulties and disjunctions--might be understood as a brilliant anticipation of the sort of art called for by Adorno. Mr. Gurr ends his study somewhat oddly with four short and unintegrated pieces of "Excursus": one asserting Sterne's generally critical view of sentimentalism; another laying out Tristram's mistrust of metaphysical explanations; a third reiterating the notions that reason and technology, used uncritically, quickly turn perverse; the last suggesting that Sterne associated excessive rationality with the decline of religion.

I confess to reading Sterne in a different spirit that Mr. Gurr does, and it is that difference in spirit which mostly explains my reservations about his critical arguments. Basically I see *Tristram Shandy* as a rueful comedy with a few strokes of satire, but still it is mostly a comedy. It is true that Walter's arcane hypothesizing tends to isolate him and certainly carries him far away from the problems at hand, but the same can be said of Toby's military fantasies or Tristram's sometimes self-indulgent digressions. As I read the novel, it *celebrates* through humor at least as much as it criticizes the fact that the human mind is not tied down to matters-at-hand, but is free to range widely and to try out any number of "attitudes" toward the intractable limitations of birth and circumstance in the real world. Yes, human intelligence can go off track in various perverse and unconstructive ways, but it also has the power to step back from its errors and follies, both to correct them and to laugh ruefully at how compelling they seemed at one time. Mental isolation is an important theme in *Tristram Shandy*, a serious and sometimes painful reality but simultaneously a long-running joke, and the overriding fact of the matter as I see it is that these characters are forever turning back *toward* one another after their moments of isolation: they are family, friends, and neighbors who need one another, however oblique their dealings, and their conversation among themselves and with the world is ongoing.

As to a putative "warfare" between Tristram and his readers, I don't believe it. Anyone will concede that Tristram has occasional moments of both hostility toward and resistance to his critical reviewers, but that this occasional irritation should be expanded into a general antipathy toward all readers seems wholly unwarranted. As I read the novel, Tristram generally has a teasing relationship with "Madame" or "Sir" and their variants, not because he is hostile to them, but because he is so much more quick-witted than they and he already knows the story they are struggling to take in. When "Sir" or "Madame" seem uncomprehending or uncooperative, it is not generally because they are adversaries but rather because they are playing their assigned roles as straight men in the midst of a Shandean comedy; their inability to follow Tristram's jesting is part of the jest, one that allows him to heighten his performance to try to overcome their obtuseness, one that allows him to show himself to good advantage. The readers in the text are authorial expedients, not adversaries.

Is Sterne finally ambivalent about enlightened modes of thinking? Surely he is, for he recognized in Walter and elsewhere how easily enlightened thinking could become a travesty of itself. But more or less the same things could be said of Sterne's ambivalent representation of

sentimentalism: carefully arranged moments of sentimental contact and sharing which from one perspective seem touching and benign often seem from another either contrived or naive or absurd. As I read him, Sterne's game *is* ambivalence, or rather, a certain inspired tentativeness of attitude that allows him to be on *both* sides of many divided issues. Tentativeness toward issues and his own characters had many advantages for Sterne; it beckons his readers with possible meanings and then teases them out of thought. But there are limitations, too, that come with this kind of tentativeness: most of the time it keeps Sterne and his creature Tristram from taking the kinds of decisive stands that Mr. Gurr would like to find in their work.