*Complete Systems and Tristram Shandy*

David Lodge’s 1978 novel, *Changing Places*, introduces us to the fictional Californian academic Morris Zapp, who bears some resemblance to the allegedly non-fictional academic Stanley Fish. At this relatively early stage of his career, Zapp is engaged in a project of scholarly over-reaching, the writing of a comprehensive commentary on the novels of Jane Austen. Some seven years later, however, in Lodge’s novel *Small World*, a more recognizably piscine Zapp confesses to, or boasts of, a total disillusionment and apostasy:

‘You see before you,’ he [Morris Zapp] began, ‘a man who once believed in the possibility of interpretation. … I thought that the goal of reading was to establish the meaning of texts. … I began a commentary on the works of Jane Austen, the aim of which was to be utterly exhaustive, to examine the novels from every conceivable angle … So that when each commentary was written, there would be *nothing further to say* about the novel in question. … The project was … self-defeating. … it isn’t possible because of the nature of language itself … I cannot ask the text what it means … the activity of reading … is … an endless, tantalising leading on, a flirtation without consummation, or if there is consummation, it is solitary, masturbatory’.1

Knowledge, for proto-Zapp, is conceived as circular, complete, encyclopaedic, hermetic. It is not capable of supplement. It is not a line or list, capable of infinite or indeed any extension. Interpretation, for proto- Zapp, if it is to be credible at all, must be final, authoritative, masterful, exclusive, singular. Zapp’s original project, to write the scholarship which ends all scholarship, is generally familiar to us as the doomed and deluded attempt to provide complete, exhaustive knowledge on any given topic. As Sterneans we are particularly familiar with both the nature of the aspiration, and the curse that attends it. Walter Shandy strives in the *Tristrapaedia* to keep pace with Tristram’s life:

he was three years and something more, indefatigably at work, and at last, had scarce compleated, by his own reckoning, one half of his undertaking: … by the very delay, the first part of the work, upon which my father had spent the most of his pains, was rendered entirely useless,–—–—every day a page or two became of no consequence.–—–— (*TS*, 5.16.448)

Obadiah Walker provides an example (as Sterne imagines and parodies it) of how one might explore all that may be said on white bears, and on black ones, by a process of grammatical operation:

A white bear! Very well. Have I ever seen one? Might I ever have seen one? Am I ever to see one? Ought I ever to have seen one? Or can I ever see one? (*TS*, 5.43.486-7; *The Notes*, pp. 392-4)

Failing in his aspiration to perfect and complete knowledge, and final and masterful understanding, Zapp makes the characteristically abrupt postmodern move to a radically sceptical view: that knowledge, communication, and understanding, if not possible in perfection, are not possible at all. He bypasses here of course the moderate scepticism of a Montaigne, or a Karl Popper, — or a Laurence Sterne.2 Reading for the later Morris Zapp is solitary and onanistic, as writing is for Tristram, and as reading is for Walter. It is an endless process. Matter grows under the hand. Writing, equally, is endless: no account can ever be complete. ‘Let no man say, — “Come — I'll write a duodecimo”’ (*TS*, 5.16.446). Abandoning not only the aspiration to total and final textual knowledge, but even the possibility of workable knowledge or communication, piscine Zapp at last reduces his role, and that of all his academic colleagues, into that butt of Menippean satirists, a learned professional (in Jonathan Swift’s terms, a suit of clothes),3 discursively upholding an institution: ‘We maintain our position in society by publicly performing a certain ritual, just like any other group of workers in the realm of discourse – lawyers, politicians, journalists.’4

*Tristram Shandy* is much concerned with learning, and with learned professionals. Sterne’s satire bears especially heavily on the quixotic quest for complete knowledge. A number of Sterne scholars have enhanced our understanding of his uses of, and satire at the expense of, the encyclopaedic and compendious.5 In this essay I hope to develop further that understanding. I suggest what seem to me to be new and significant parallels with Sterne’s humanist forebears Rabelais and Burton, adding further evidence to the case for his relation to a tradition of learned wit famously established in a seminal article by Douglas Jefferson.6 Throughout this essay I pursue aspects of a key historical question, the contest between systematising and particularising approaches to and representation of understanding and evidence, which I have already addressed in essays on Sterne and Swift.7

Proto-Zapp’s pseudo-Promethean pursuit of textual compendiousness is anticipated, seriously, ironically, or tragically, in many writers before him. It may be found in Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, for instance, or in George Eliot’s Casaubon, or, with a special pertinence to Sterne, in Rabelais’s Fourth Book. On the island of Papimany, home of the Pope-worshippers, Pantagruel and his companions come across, near the church-gate, ‘a huge thick book, gilt, and covered all over with precious stones’. This, explains their guide, the bishop Homenas, is the volume of ‘the sacred decretals … written with the hand of an angel of the cherubim kind, … miraculously transmitted to us here from the very heaven of heavens’. A chapter is dedicated to Homenas’s praise of this great volume:

O *Seraphic Sextum*! (continu’d *Homenas*,) how necessary are you not to the Salvation of poor Mortals. O *Cherubic Clementinae*! how perfectly the perfect institution of a true Christian is contain’d and describ’d in you! O *Angelical Extravagants*! how many poor souls that wander up and down in mortal Bodies, through this vale of Misery, would perish, were it not for you! When, ha! When shall this special gift of grace be bestow’d on Man kind, as to lay aside all other Studies and Concerns, to use you, to peruse you, to understand you, to know you by heart, to practise you, to incorporate you, to turn you into blood, and incenter you into the deepest Ventricles of their Brains, the inmost Marrow of their Bones, and most intricate Labyrinth of their Arteries? Then, ha then, and no sooner than then, nor otherwise than thus shall the World be happy!8

The huge, thick book which is the object of Homenas’s obsessive and singular devotion is a compendium of all the papal decrees, a historical comprehensive statement and embodiment of papal power over the universal church. Homenas’s phrase ‘seraphic Sextum’ refers to the first great codified papal decretal, or compilation of papal decrees, made by [St. Raymond of Peñaforte](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Raymond_of_Pe%C3%B1aforte) from 1230, at the request of Gregory IX; the ‘cherubic Clementinae’ is the last official collection, of Clement V, published in 1317; the ‘Angelical Extravagants’ are all the later decrees, not published in the canonical collections. For Homenas the Decretals are not only a book, but the only book. They constitute not only a compendium but also a formation. They perfectly contain and describe ‘the perfect institution of a true Christian’. Other reading can only do harm; the world will be happy, for Homenas, only when mankind ‘lay[s] aside all other Studies and Concerns’. For Rabelais himself by contrast only the Holy Scriptures could (in the sphere of religion) take on this exclusive role. The Abbey of Thélème admits, amongst the learned,

pure, honest, faithful, true,

Expounders of the Scriptures old and new.

Whose glosses do not blind our reason, but

Make it to see the clearer.9

Similarly for John Donne, another renegade romanist, a true church offers salvation not through papal dictät or oral tradition but through the written word, ‘the Word inspired by the holy Ghost; not Apocryphall, not Decretall, not Traditionall’.10 For Homenas however the Decretals replace Scripture, and constitute themselves as the only scripture. Sterne of course was aware of this Rabelaisian parody of besotted and erroneous belief in a compendium: he gives the name of its sufferer, Homenas, to a character in his ‘Rabelaisian Fragment’. Indeed, the ‘Rabelaisian Fragment’ offers its own parodic institute for sermon makers, Longinus Rabelaicus’s ‘thorough-stitch’d System of the Kerukopaedia’, which sets forth ‘all that is needful to be known … of the Art of making all kinds of your theological, hebdomadical, rostrummical, humdrummical what d’ye call-ems’. Longinus Rabelaicus is himself implicated in the satire of system makers, in his wish, expressed in an imagery recognisably both Rabelaisian and Homenassian, that ‘all the scatter’d Rules of the kerukopaedia, could be but once collected into one Code, as thick as *Panurge*’s Head, and the Whole *cleanly* digested … and bound up, … by way of a regular Institute, and then put into the Hands of every … Licenced Preacher in great Britain & Ireland’.11

Homenas’s notion of all that is necessary to be known offers an entire contrast with the ideal humanist education enjoyed by the young Gargantua, once he has been taken in hand by his tutor Ponocrates. Gargantua learns about food, for example, by the experience of convivial eating, and by the consulting of numerous learned books:

Then, (if they thought good), they continued reading, or began to discourse merrily together; speaking first of the vertue, propriety, efficacy, and nature of all that was served in at the table; of bread, of wine, of water, of salt, of fleshes, fishes, fruits, herbs, roots, and of their dressing; by meanes whereof, he learned in a little time all the passages competent for this, that were to be found in *Pliny, Athenaeus, Dioscorides, Julius Pollux, Galen, Porphirie, Oppian, Polybius, Heliodore, Aristotle, Elian*, and others. Whilest they talked of these things, many times to be the more certain, they caused the very books to be brought to the table …

In a similar fashion, he learns about trees and plants, from experience, and plural ancient authority:

… passing through certain meadows, or other grassie places, [Gargantua] beheld the trees and plants, comparing them with what is written of them in the books of the ancients, such as *Theophrast, Dioscorides, Marinus, Pliny, Nicander, Macer,* and *Galen*.

Gargantua’s humanist knowledge is knowledge of specifics, derived from many experienced particulars, and from a catholic range of writings. The books that are brought to the table are plural, and classical. The natural or culinary original is compared with its specific textual equivalent, chosen from amongst many. This is such an education as might equally be gained by the free-living gentlemen and ladies of Gargantua’s foundation, the Abbey of Thélème, with its ‘faire great libraries in *Greek, Latine, Hebrew, French, Italian*, and *Spanish*, respectively distributed in their several cantons, according to the diversity of these languages’.12

That is a humanist ideal. The opposite of that ideal, the compendium or system, has been a regular target of humanist satirists. The Hack writer who recounts *A Tale of a Tub* (since attributed to Jonathan Swift) is obsessed with modern complete systems. At the beginning of his booklist of the productions of Grub Street he reports that his friends prevailed upon him ‘to travel in a compleat and laborious Dissertation upon the prime Productions of our Society’. This satiric and imaginary project bears a close resemblance to William Wotton’s published curriculum of modern knowledge, the *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning*, a book which for Swift was the prime representative and symbol of the impossible modern quest for comprehensive understanding of the world. Wotton had claimed that, at least in the spheres of modern natural and mathematical sciences, complete knowledge was within reach:

… such Swarms of Great men in every part of Natural and Mathematical Knowledge have within these few Years appeared, that it may … be believed, that if … learned men do not divert their Thoughts to Speculations of another Kind, the next Age will not find very much Work of this kind to do.13

Sterne’s Tristram no doubt has Wotton, or at least Swift’s Wotton, in mind when he identifies himself for a moment with his modern ‘fellow labourers and associates in this great harvest of our learning’. Like Wotton, Tristram rejoices that

our knowledge physical, metaphysical, physiological, polemical, nautical, mathematical, ænigmatical, technical, biographical, romantical, chemical, and obstetrical, with fifty other branches of it, … have, for these two last centuries and more, gradually been creeping upwards towards that Αχμη of their perfections, from which, if we may form a conjecture from the advances of these last seven years, we cannot possibly be far off.

Tristram’s conclusion however differs from William Wotton’s. The result of reaching such an Αχμη will not be an end to science or to history, but an inevitable and hopeless return to the whirligig of enquiry:

When that happens … it will put an end to all kind of writings whatsoever;—the want of all kind of writing will put an end to all kind of reading;—and that in time, As war begets poverty, poverty peace,—must, in course, put an end to all kind of knowledge, —and then—we shall have all to begin over again; or, in other words, be exactly where we started. (*TS*, 1.21.71-2.)14

Swift’s hack is not troubled, at least in principle, by any such uncertainty. As Wotton had done, he labours to produce a book which says and orders all that is to be said on its subject. However, his intended ‘compleat and laborious Dissertation upon the prime Productions of our Society’ has been anticipated by one of the most eminent of his fellow moderns, who

… began with the History of *Reynard* the *Fox*, but neither lived to publish his Essay, nor to proceed farther in so useful an Attempt which is very much to be lamented, because the Discovery he made … is now universally received; nor, do I think, any of the Learned will dispute, that famous Treatise to be a compleat Body of Civil Knowledge, and the *Revelation*, or rather the *Apocalyps*, of all State-*Arcana*.

Such compendia, in the modern world, are everywhere. They may be found even, in fact especially, in a mad house. If the tourist approaches one of the denizens,

*Sir*, says he, *Give me a Penny, and I’ll sing you a Song: But give me the Penny first* … What a compleat System of *Court-Skill* is here described in every Branch of it …15

Jack, another madman, representative of modern sectarianism, finds his own complete system in his Father’s Will, of which he became ‘the fondest Creature imaginable’. The word ‘fondest’ here oscillates between the Shakespearean and the modern sense, inferring both affection and crazed obsession. For Jack the New Testament is no mere text, to be read with understanding, but ‘Meat, Drink, and Cloth, … the Philosopher’s Stone, and the Universal Medicine’. The Father’s Will, as the Father himself intended it, does indeed contain ‘full Instructions in every particular concerning the Wearing and Management of your Coats’. It is left to the brothers as a complete rule of Christian life and belief. The Father did not however mean it, as his son Jack takes it, for a nostrum for all occasions and all ills, as a Night -cap or Umbrello, as a cure for Fits, the stomach ache, or a sore Toe, or as a dictionary of authentic phrases for use on the common emergencies of life.16 Jack resorts to it as a catholic remedy, which he applies on all occasions, and therefore always misapplies. Particular wounds and failures, however, in human life, and in human understanding, require specific remedies, rather than universal cures: as the wound caused by Tristram’s encounter with the sash window calls for the application of lint and basilicon, rather than the application of a couple of folios of Spencer and Maimonides on Hebrew rituals (*TS*, 5.27.459).

Walter Shandy of course is the champion of universal systems, and notoriously he keeps by him two compendia of catholic information, one real and historical, if unlikely, the second wholly fictional: Ernulphus on curses, and Slawkenbergius on noses. In the third volume of *Tristram Shandy*, the romanist Dr Slop takes a penknife to the ‘good, honest, devilish tight, hard knots’ made by Obadiah in Slop’s bag of obstetrical instruments. Having cut his thumb ‘quite across to the very bone’ in this operation, Slop falls to ‘stamping and cursing and damning at *Obadiah* at a most dreadful rate’ (*TS*, 3.7.193, 3.10.198), a disproportionate response which provokes Walter to an appeal to the compendium of curses attributed to Ernulf, twelfth-century Bishop of Rochester. That collection was written down in the Textus Roffensis, probably compiled at Ernulf’s request. The *Textus* was printed in the Harleian Miscellany in 1745, and thence in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, where Sterne appears to have found it.17 Though Walter’s use here of Ernulphus strikes a pose of ‘the most *Cervantick* gravity’, it’s clear enough that he, as well as Slop, is implicated in Sterne’s irony. Ernulphus is at all times ready to Walter’s hand: ‘’tis here upon the shelf over my head; – ’. Ernulphus’s compendium of maledictions is valued by Walter precisely because it is comprehensive, and suitable for all conceivable occasions: ‘I have the greatest veneration in the world for that gentleman, who … sat down and composed … fit forms of swearing suitable to all cases, from the lowest to the highest provocations which could possibly happen to him’ (*TS*, 3.10.200). Ernulphus’s work is structured as a complete curriculum of the subject. It comprehensively lists all the agents of the curse (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the Virgin Mary, St Michael, St John, the apostles, the martyrs, the confessors, and all the saints). It lists all the locations in which the victim may be cursed, all the activities, and every physical part, ‘a vertice capitis, usque ad plantam pedis’ (*TS*, 3.11.208). It is complete, authoritative, even sublime, possessed of that greatness and energy which Robert Lowth had found in the Hebrew Bible less than a decade earlier:

There is an orientality in his, we cannot rise up to: besides, he is more copious in his invention, — … had such a thorough knowledge of the human frame, its membranes, nerves, ligaments, knittings of the joints, and articulations, — that when *Ernulphus* cursed, — no part escaped him. — ’Tis true, there is something of a *hardness* in his manner, … – but then there is such a greatness of *gusto*! — (*TS,* 3. 12. 215)

Ernulphus is the *fons et origo* of swearing. All other oaths derive from him. His book is the Ur-text, and has the authority of an Ur-text. Explicitly, Walter understands Ernulphus’s work as a pandect of laws, a gathering together of scattered writings and oral tradition into a complete and authoritative printed volume:

My father… consider’d … *Ernulphus*’s anathema, as an institute of swearing, in which … upon the decline of *swearing* in some milder pontificate, *Ernulphus*, by order of the succeeding Pope, had with great learning and diligence collected together all the laws of it; — for the same reason that *Justinian* … had ordered his chancellor *Tribonian* to collect the *Roman* or civil laws all together into one code or digest, — lest through the rust of time, — and the fatality of all things committed to oral tradition, they should be lost to the world for ever.

*TS,* 3. 12. 215

It matters that Ernulphus’s institute of swearing is a book, a physical object reachable from the shelf, a written and latterly a printed record of all that needs to be known about the important business of malediction. For Walter Shandy, Ernulphus constitutes a scripture, and is valued as such, not least when set against the ephemeral and fragmentary orality of Slop and his fellow papists.

Sterne’s most notorious instance of the fictional compendium is Slawkenbergius. It is the heroic scholarly achievement of Hafen Slawkenbergius to have dedicated the labours of his life, neglected his pastimes, called forth all the powers and faculties of his nature, and macerated himself in the service of mankind, to ‘write a grand FOLIO for them, upon the subject of their noses’. This is as imposing a folio as Homenas shows off to his visitors in Papimany, and Tristram takes a properly bibliographical interest in its physical make-up: ‘his prologomena … should have come first, — but the bookbinder has most injudiciously placed it betwixt the analitical contents of the book, and the book itself’ (*TS*, 3.38.273). What Tristram calls the ‘analitical contents’ is either such a list of contents as was set before Wotton’s *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning*, or an index; either or both of these are proper paratexts for a modern scholarly compendium. Slawkenbergius achieves in his folio a comprehensive work of scholarship on his chosen subject, ‘a thorough-stitch’d DIGEST and regular institute of *noses*; comprehending in it, all that is, or can be needful to be known about them’ (*TS*, 3.38.274). Indeed, Slawkenbergius is not only complete, but also, because complete, exemplary. It constitutes ‘a prototype for all writers, of voluminous works at least, to model their books by, — for he has taken in, Sir, the whole subject, — examined every part of it, *dialectically*’. His book however is a labour of collation rather than of creation, achieved not through thought or creativity but through theft, ‘collecting and compiling,—begging, borrowing, and stealing, as he went along, all that had been wrote or wrangled thereupon in the schools and porticos of the learned’ (*TS*, 3. 38. 274). Like the papal decretals or any other institute the great folio of Slawkenbergius is wholly derivative, a collection of *variorum interpretum notae* rather than a work of original understanding, borrowed or stolen from real authorities (Bruscambille, Bouchet, Paræus), or fictional ones (Prignitz, Scroderus). Slawkenbergius’s method is much the same in quality, if not in quantity, as that of Sterne’s plagiarising sermon writer, nimming Homenas.

For Walter Shandy, however, it is enough that Slawkenbergius’s great treatise is complete, in its consideration of noses, and indeed of all other possible knowledge. It is as wholly and exclusively satisfactory to Walter, as the decretals are to Rabelais’s Bishop Homenas:

*Slawkenbergius* in every page of him was a rich treasury of inexhaustible knowledge to my father, — … and he would often say in closing the book, that if all the arts and sciences in the world, with the books which treated of them, were lost, — … — and *Slawkenbergius* only left,—there would be enough in him … to set the world a-going again.

*TS*, 3. 42. 285

Slawkenbergius is to Walter a latter day scripture, or a former day Everyman’s Library. Like the decretals to Homenas, Slawkenbergius is to Walter a sacred text, a physical text, even an erotic text, constantly resorted to in his regular formal devotions:

A treasure therefore was he indeed! an institute of all that was necessary to be known of noses, and every thing else, — at *matin*, noon, and vespers was *Hafen Slawkenbergius* his recreation and delight: ’twas for ever in his hands, — you would have sworn, Sir, it had been a canon’s prayer-book, — so worn, so glazed, so contrited and attrited was it with fingers and with thumbs in all its parts, from one end even unto the other.

*TS*, 3. 42. 285

As Walter derives daylong ‘recreation and delight’ from his extensive and tactile relationship with Slawkenbergius, so the enraptured Bishop Homenas insists that the happiness of mankind depends on their incorporating and incentring the Decretals into their very blood and marrow.

‘Philosophy is not built upon tales; and therefore ’twas certainly wrong in Slawkenbergius to send them into the world by that name’ (*TS*, 3.42.286). Slawkenbergius’s philosophical compendium of noses takes, in fact, the wrong form. Works of science, of natural philosophy are normally structured, sub-divided, bounded. They may be delineated by tables of contents, as in Wotton. They can be set out in elaborate Ramistical hierarchies of the world of knowledge, as famously in the great *Encyclopédie* of D’Alembert and Diderot.18 Sterne would have found a similarly ordered, if less fully elaborated, graphical representation of the enlightenment *curriculum* of knowledge in a book he demonstrably knew, and used extensively, Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (2 vols, London, 1728). Chambers intended his work as ‘a Course of Antient and Modern learning’. He offers in his Preface a table or ‘Division’ of knowledge, which tells us that all ‘knowledge, is either *Natural* and *Scientifical* … Or *Artificial* and *Technical’*. Such knowledge, to follow just one ramification of the table, as is ‘*Natural* and *Scientifical*’, is either Sensible Or Rational’; such knowledge as is ‘*Sensible*’ comprehends ‘Meteorology, Hydrology, Minerology, Phytology, Zoology’. Chambers insists, however, that such a ‘View of Knowledge’ can exhibit ‘only the grand, constituent Parts thereof. It would be endless to pursue it into all its Members and Ramifications; which is the proper Business of the Book itself’.19 It is the proper business of a cyclopaedia to be complete.

Institutes, curricula, compendia, decretals, like Morris Zapp’s work on Jane Austen, are similarly taxonomic. They are encyclopaedic; they are not linear, but cyclical, curricular. They return into themselves. Where Walter Shandy aspires to and worships the comprehensive and compendious, Sterne however prefers the incomplete, the shaggy-dog story, the potentially endless list. Tales, in Sterne, and in Sterne’s Slawkenbergius, rarely have either structure or outcomes. They typically end in some version of Sterne’s favourite trope, aposiopesis. His unresolved stories include, in *A Sentimental Journey*, the starling, and the notary’s fragment, and in *Tristram Shandy* Slawkenbergius’s Tale itself. *Tristram Shandy* has many such stories, truncated, broken off, unconsummated. It is replete also with lists, of hobby-horses, dedicatees, arguments, military words, theological words, obstetric instruments, critics, weapons, orders of nuns, dramatis personae, chapters, things, lost cities, authorities for parental grief, heritable possessions, prodigies of youthful learning, the streets of Paris, cures for a stiff leg, qualities of love, towns marking Marlborough’s march, ways of controlling the kicking of one’s ass.

In general Sterne owes much in this, as Jack Lynch has pointed out in an important article, to the Renaissance tradition of *copia*, formally established by Erasmus in 1512 in his *De dupliciis copia verborum ac rerum*,‘a celebration’, in Lynch’s words, ‘of textuality, a show of jubilation in the variety of words and matter’. Erasmus’s handbook set out for future readers a whole set of methods for the achieving of both verbal and substantial copiousness. Lynch compellingly demonstrates the influence of Erasmus’s handbook not only on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors, but also on Sterne: ‘Nearly every one of Erasmus’s techniques shows up somewhere in Tristram Shandy’. In particular, Lynch tellingly compares, with Walter Shandy’s celebration of Ernulphus’s sublimely copious ‘orientality’, Erasmus’s suggestion that one of the ends of writing in his manner is ‘Asianam illam exuberantiam imitari’ [‘to imitate Asian exuberance’] 20

Sterne learnt something too about *copia* from one of his favourite books, Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1628). Burton’s very title suggests something compendious. His subtitle promises to define melancholy, and to give ‘all the kinds, causes, symptoms, prognosticks and severall cures of it’, divided into ‘three Partitions, with their severall Sections, members & subsections’, each provided with its own Ramistical Synopsis. This appearance of, or aspiration to, complete and compendious order breaks down in the telling under its own weight. Love, for example, as a cause of melancholy, manifests itself in ‘*pruriens corpus, pruriens anima*, amorous conceits, tickling thoughts, sweet and pleasant hopes’; it is ‘the sole subject almost of poetry, …those old Anacreons, all our Greek and Latin epigrammatists, love writers, … Eustathius, Achilles Tatius, Aristaenetus, Heliodorus, Plato, Plutarch, Lucian, Parthenius, … Ovid, Catullus, Tibullus, etc., our new Ariostos, Boiardos, authors of Arcadia, Urania, Faerie Queene, etc, … with the rest of those facete modern poets, have written in this kind, … are but as so many symptoms of love’. Burton confesses himself defeated by love, as by so many of the other partitions of melancholy. Such lists can go on for ever. ‘I conclude’, Burton writes, ‘there is no end of love’s symptoms, ’tis a bottomless pit. Love is subject to no dimensions; not to be surveyed by any art or engine’. 21 Burton is in this a forerunner of Morris Zapp, attempting a complete anatomy of all his subject, and discovering or revealing the impossibility of doing so in the course of the exercise itself. Love, like the study of Jane Austen, turns out to have no end or circumference, to be incapable of comprehensive mapping by any artificial means. For Burton and for Sterne, however, unlike Zapp, there is a point and a pleasure in pursuing the exercise, even without hope of an ending.

The *copia* of Sterne’s writing no doubt owes at least as much to Rabelais as it does to Burton, driven especially by the publication of the Urquhart and Motteux translation in 1693, with its floridly baroque catalogues of libraries, cods, cod etymologies, weapons, ‘defamatory epithetes’, genealogies, heroes’ occupations, Gargantuan games, and fools. The endless list in Rabelais is both a rhetorical figure and an exemplification of plenitude. So Rabelais relates that, while the other inhabitants of besieged Corinth prepare (an extensive list of) the fortifications, armour and weapons of the city, Diogenes, too old for battle, rolls his tub up the hill and

… in a great vehemency of spirit, did … turn it, veer it, wheel it, whirl it, frisk it, jumble it, shuffle it, huddle it, tumble it, hurry it, joult it, justle it, overthrow it … And then again in a mighty bustle he bandy’d it, slubber’d it, hack’d it, whitled it, way’d it, darted it, hurled it, … trapped it, rumbled it, slid it down the hill, and precipitated it from the very height of the Cranie; then from the foot to the top (like another Sisyphus with his stone) bore it up again, and every way so banged it and belaboured it that it was ten thousand to one he had not struck the bottom of it out.

Rabelais here describes his parodic humour as ‘his *Diogenical* Tub’, which once ‘set a-going’ (the phrase is Urquhart’s, as well as Sterne’s), rolls without pause. In its provision of humorous liquor the Diogenical or Rabelaisian tub is in itself ‘inexhaustible; it hath a lively spring and perpetual current’.22

Sterne’s lists are often Rabelaisian in form and effect even where not Rabelaisian in substance. Faced with the important and particular question of whether his son should be put into breeches, Walter appeals to one of his favourite compendia, the *De re vestiaria veterum* of Albertus Rubenius (Antwerp, 1665), and derives, he claims, from Rubenius whole lists of Roman items of clothing and footwear:

Rubenius threw him down upon the counter all kinds of shoes which had been in fashion with the Romans. —There was,

The open shoe.

The close shoe.

The slip shoe.

The wooden shoe.

The soc.

The buskin.

And The military shoe with hobnails in it, which Juvenal takes

notice of.

But though Rubenius discusses many of these things, he provides no lists as such. Nor, indeed, does Lefèvre de Morsan in *The Manners and Customs of the Romans, Translated from the French* (1640), according to the Florida editors a more likely mediate or immediate source (*TS*, 6.19.530; *The Notes,* p. 419). The format of Sterne’s list in fact altogether more closely resembles some of Rabelais’s, his list for example of types of fool:

Fatal f.

Natural f.

Celestial f.

Erratick f.

Eccentrick f.

Aethereal and Junonian f.

Arctick f.

Heroick f.

Genial f.

Inconstant f.

Earthly f.

Solacious and sporting f. 23

I offer here no more than a sample of a list which continues, in two columns, for three pages, and contains over two hundred instances. Sterne’s list of vestments and shoes in Rubenius gives every promise of going on as long as such Rabelaisian lists—that is, in principle, forever—but like other compendia it leaves Walter holding wretched stalks of disappointment. It covers every variety of ancient dress and footwear, with the solitary exception of the one garment on which Walter seeks urgent information:

Rubenius shewed my father how well they all fitted,—in what manner

they laced on,—with what points, straps, thongs, latchets, ribands,

jaggs, and ends.—

—But I want to be informed about the breeches, said my father.

*TS*, 6.19.531

Even Walter, *in extremis*, needs to go beyond the compendium to the particular instance.

With an exemplary concern for the precision and usefulness of generic categories, Howard Weinbrot has denied that *Tristram Shandy*, that ‘triumph of sentimental English love and amiable English idiosyncrasy’, may properly be considered a Menippean satire.24 In its particular relation to the modern aspiration and claim to perfect knowledge, however, *Tristram* is as Menippean as one could wish. Sterne echoes Rabelais’s derisive dismissal of trust in comprehensive pandects, institutes and decretals, re-enacts Burton’s experiential failure to produce an ordered anatomy, and repeats Swift’s mockery of modern pretensions to mastery of all that might be known. In these continuities with a key satiric discourse of his humanist past, Sterne engages with large questions of knowledge and understanding. No single book contains all truth. There can be no comprehensive accounts, or catholic remedies. We live in a world of particulars, and its diseases require specifics. The attempt to create complete and fixed systems, legislative, interpretative, noetic, of words or state arcana or noses or curses or Jane Austen, is always (already) doomed. All systems founder in the face of the individual, the particular and the exceptional: aardvarks and black swans, sash-windows and breeches. Systems, whether borrowed from another man or created by oneself, always enslave. The world is best learnt and known not from some favourite thorough-stitch’d institute, but as Gargantua learnt and understood it, by walking through meadows, regarding the skies, making much music, eating many foods, reading many books, and talking with many friends.

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1. David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Romance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 24-6.

2. See J. T. Parnell, ‘Swift, Sterne, and the Skeptical Tradition’, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 23 (1994), 221-42.

3. *A Tale of a Tub and other Works*, ed. Marcus Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 49-50, 369-70.

4. Lodge, *Small World,* p. 28.

5. Particularly, Jonathan Laidlow, ‘A Compendium of Shandys: Methods of Organising Knowledge in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*’, *Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 1 (2000), 181-200; Jack Lynch, ‘Relicks of Learning: Sterne among the Renaissance Encyclopedists’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 13 (2000), 1-17; Christopher Fanning, ‘“This Fragment of Life”: Sterne’s Encyclopaedic Ethics’, *The Shandean*, 13 (2002), 55-67; Judith Hawley, ‘Sterne and the Cyclopaedia Revisited’, *Shandean*, 15 (2004), 57-77.

6. Douglas W. Jefferson, ‘Tristram Shandy and the Tradition of Learned Wit’, *Essays in Criticism*, 1 (1951), 225-48.

7. Marcus Walsh, ‘Scriblerian satire, *A Political Romance*, the “Rabelaisian Fragment”, and the origins of *Tristram Shandy*’, *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne*, ed. Thomas Keymer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 21-33; ‘Telling Tales and Gathering fragments: Jonathan Swift’s *Tale of a Tub*’, *Proceedings of the Fifth Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Hermann J. Real (Munich: Fink, 2008), pp. 151-63.

8. Book IV, chs. lxix, li. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, tr. Sir Thomas Urquhart and Pierre Le Motteux (London: Everyman’s Library, 1994), pp. 634, 640. See Antony Coleman, ‘Sterne’s use of the Motteux-Ozell Rabelais’, *Notes and Queries*, 25 (1978), 55-8.

9. Book I, ch.liv. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, p. 151.

10. In a sermon preached at Christmas, 1628. *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1953-62), 8. 309.

11. *Miscellaneous Writings*; The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne. Vol. 9. Eds. Melvyn New and W. B. Gerard ( Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), p. 159.

12. Book I, chs. xxiii, liii. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, pp. 76-7, 80, 148.

13. William Wotton, *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694), p.348.

14. The tag ‘As war begets poverty, poverty peace’ is a quotation of a Swiftian quotation from Wing’s *Almanack*, used in a marginal annotation at the opening of ‘The Battel of the Books’. See *A Tale of a Tub and other Works*, pp. 143, 466.

15. *A Tale of a Tub and other Works*, pp. 42, 83, 115.

16. *A Tale of a Tub and other Works*, pp. 123, 47, 124.

17. William A. Jackson, ‘The Curse of Ernulphus’, *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 14 (1960), 392-4.

18. The authoritative account of Ramus (Pierre de la Ramée), and the influence of his intellectual method, is Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958). See especially pp. 301, 318.

19. Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (2 vols, London, 1728), 1.ii. Sterne’s use of Chambers has been adequately demonstrated; see particularly Bernard L. Greenberg, ‘Laurence Sterne and Chambers’s Cyclopedia’, *MLN* 69 (1954), 560-2. Samuel Johnson’s great *Dictionary of the English Language* had appeared, of course, in 1755. Other encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and compendia closely contemporary with and possibly known to Sterne include Temple Henry Croker, Thomas Williams, and Samuel Clark, *The Complete Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences, in which the whole Circle of Human Learning is Explained* (London, 1765), and the monumental *Universal History, from the Earliest Account of Time* (65 vols, London, 1747-68), by John Swinton, John Campbell, George Shelvocke, Archibald Bower, George Psalmanazar, and George Sale. Sterne borrowed the first five volumes of the *Universal History* from York Minster Library. See C. B. L. Barr and W.G. Day ‘Sterne and York Minster Library’, *Shandean,* 2 (1990), 18.

20. Lynch, ‘The Relicks of Learning’, pp. 3-8. Lynch’s reference is to Desiderius Erasmus, *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum commentarii duo*, ed. Betty I. Knott (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1988), pp. 32-33, in *Erasmi Opera Omnia, ordinis primi, tomus sextus*.

21. Part 3, Sect. 2, Memb. 3; *Anatomy of Melancholy* (3 vols, London: Dent, 1932), 3. 180, 182, 184.

22. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, pp. 293, 298.

23. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, p. 449.

24. *Menippean Satire Reconsidered: from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), p. 297.