The Trade in Knowledge in *Tristram Shandy*

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One could hardly imagine a conference theme better suited to the Humor of our Age than ‘Opening Markets’.[[1]](#footnote-1) That rubric might by some be suspected of privileging the historical, the material and indeed the materialistic, and of marginalising the literary and the textual. We must nevertheless remember that ours is an age in which the market, in the form of global turbo capitalism, has triumphed even through crisis, and that many of our Universities have accepted their primary mission as commodity providers on behalf of, and within, the competitive networks of commerce. Learning has always had a market value, though often a very small value, and is properly recognised as a trade. From the disciplinary point of view, literary studies have necessarily given way to the students of contextual and material cultures, a disciplinary army ‘determined’, in Professor Peter Barry’s resonantly punning phrase, ‘*to make English History*’; Barry’s remark may properly be applied to literary or textual study in any language of course.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Literature has always concerned itself of course with trade, with the places of trade, and with traders: the money-changers in the temple, smithies and carpenter’s shops, Bartholomew as well as Vanity Fair, Autolycus the pedlar in Shakespeare’s Bohemia, Smithfield Market and Covent Garden, St Paul’s Churchyard and Drury Lane, Jane Austen’s millinery shops and Laurence Sterne’s sausage shops. The commodities as well as the locations are various, but the transactions are broadly the same. As Malcolm Bradbury put it thirty years ago, life, and therefore the representation of life in fiction, is

… nothing else but making a trade, finding an equivalent, striking a bargain, forging a value … bartering your mind and body … on the economic frontier in an attempt to find a meaning, invent a value, find your highest price, trade at the best possible rate of exchange.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Tristram Shandy was sufficiently aware of this truth: ‘every man will speak of the fair as his own market has gone in it;—for which cause I affirm it over again to be one of the vilest worlds that ever was made’ (1.5.). To an even greater extent than we have yet perhaps understood, Sterne’s Menippean fiction *Tristram Shandy* is everywhere concerned with trade, value, exchange, and property. In this essay I shall be concerned less with literal trade and commerce in *Tristram Shandy,* than with Sterne’s repeated, and at a number of points salient, use of trade as a metaphor.

The commodity which is endlessly traded, valued, exchanged, and owned in *Tristram Shandy* is knowledge. Sterne knew very well that he was a writer for hire. Even so slight and brief a discourse as the book’s Dedication is a manufactured commodity, ‘made’ for no specific ‘Prince, Prelate, Pope, or Potentate’, not yet ‘hawk’d about’, but put up ‘fairly to publick sale’, for the price of fifty guineas, which is less, Sterne claims, than it is worth (1.9). Perhaps the most extended and explicit passage on the tradeability of knowledge, or the trade of learning, comes in Sterne’s exploration of the progress of a weightier if briefer proposition, an ancient apothegm or fragment of wisdom literature: ‘*That we and our children were born to die,—but neither of us born to be slaves’*. The ‘sentiment’ apparently originated with the Indian philosophers, was stolen by Alexander the Great, communicated via Eleazar and Josephus, and passed from thence to John Donne, from whom Sterne apparently, as was his wont, stole it once more.[[4]](#footnote-4) By land, the sentiment travelled through Babylon, to Greece, to Rome, to France, ‘and from France to England—So things come round’. By water, ‘the sentiment might easily have come down the Ganges’, and so

following the course of trade … might be carried with other drugs and spices up the Red Sea to Joddah, the port of Mekka, … and from thence by karrawans to Coptos, but three days journey distant, so down the Nile directly to Alexandria, where the SENTIMENT would be landed at the very foot of the great stair case of the Alexandrian library,—and from that store-house it would be fetched. (5. 12).

‘Bless me!’, our narrator concludes; ‘what a trade was driven by the learned in those days!’ Thus a humane thought or sentiment becomes a tradeable object which follows the course of commerce, with such other material commodities as ‘drugs and spices’. It is carried by caravan along trade routes, by manageable stages. Finally it sails along the Nile, to be ‘landed’ at the staircase of the greatest of ancient libraries, imaged as a mere warehouse for storing things, rather than a repository of the intellectual life. As James Work and the Florida editors have pointed out, Sterne here ‘burlesques serious attempts (such as that of Sir William Temple in his *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning,* 1692) to trace the progress of the arts and sciences from their presumed origin in the East, to western Europe’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus a high cultural history, the progress narrative explored in historiography and adopted and exploited in epic and in high lyric poetry, is reduced to a tracking history, such as we might read as we anticipate the delivery, to the very foot of our own stair case, of a consumer-good ordered from the other side of the world.

The key advocate and representative in Sterne’s book of the trade in knowledge is Walter Shandy. He has relevant expertise of course, having been ‘a *Turky* merchant’, a member of the Turkey or Levant Company, retiring just as that company entered its period of final decline. As a merchant, Walter believes that knowledge can, or should, like other goods be accessed and transported by the easiest and most effective means: ‘I am convinced … that there is a north-west passage to the intellectual world’ (5.42). He believes in the materiality of knowledge, as a commodity capable of infinite divisibility and precise measurement:

—To come at the exact weight of things in the scientific steel-yard, the fulcrum, he would say, should … avoid all friction from popular tenets;---without this the minutiæ of philosophy, which should always turn the balance, will have no weight at all.—Knowledge, like matter, he would affirm, was divisible in infinitum;—that the grains and scruples were as much a part of it, as the gravitation of the whole world.— (2. 19).

Walter treats his knowledge as a possession: ‘He picked up an opinion, Sir, as a man in a state of nature picks up an apple. —It becomes his own’. As the learned civilian Tribonius argues,[[6]](#footnote-6) ‘the sweat of a man’s brows, and the exsudations of a man’s brains, are as much a man’s own property, as the breeches upon his backside’; and therefore ‘’tis evident that the gatherer of the apple, in so doing, has mix’d up something which was his own, with the apple which was not his own, by which means he has acquired a property.’ Hence,

By the same learned chain of reasoning my father stood up for all his opinions: he had spared no pains in picking them up, and the more they lay out of the common way, the better still was his title. —…so that they might well and truely be said to be his own goods and chattles.— … (3. 34)

Walter’s relationship to knowledge however goes beyond the proprietorial to the concupiscent. He is a collector of philosophical rarities, and feels as close to, and as possessive of, his curiosities as any lover. We see in him a parable, a prosopopoeia and a prophecy of the erotics of consumerism. He takes ‘a strong fancy’ toa prologue upon long noses from ‘the moment he laid his hands upon it’, and pays three half crowns for this rarity. Having got the book safely home, ‘he solaced himself with Bruscambille after the manner, in which, ’tis ten to one, your worship solaced yourself with your first mistress,—that is, from morning even unto night’ (3. 35). His involvement with Slawkenbergius, the master text of noses, is yet closer. Slawkenbergius is for Walter, explicitly, both a treasure and a pleasure:

— 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

Walter’s relationship with the physical corpus of Slawkenbergius’s Tales is both devotional— regular, continual, faithful—and erotic— intimate, tactile, solitary.

Nor is Walter the only Shandy brother who rides his hobby horse in eager ‘pursuit of this bewitching phantom, Knowledge’. Toby becomes in his own way a virtuoso, another questor after the curious, in his case the maps and plans of the fortified towns of Italy and Flanders:

… the desire of knowledge, like the thirst of riches, increases ever with the acquisition of it. The more my uncle Toby pored over his map, the more he took a liking to it; —by the same process and electrical assimilation … thro’ which … the souls of connoisseurs themselves, by long friction and incumbition, have the happiness, at length, to get all be-virtu’d,—be-pictur’d,—be-butterflied, and be-fiddled.

The more my uncle Toby drank of this sweet fountain of science, the greater was the heat and impatience of his thirst … (2.3)

The appetite grows with eating, a fact known to Shakespeare’s Hamlet as well as to Rabelais’s Gargantua. Toby grows into liking, and progresses to heat, impatience, and thirst. ‘At length’ he becomes one with his fellow connoisseurs, whether of pictures, or natural objects, or books, in reaching a climax of happiness. ‘Long friction’ and ‘incumbition’ label such activities and desires as electrical, physical and amatory. ‘Incumbition’, a word apparently invented by Sterne for this particular occasion, is ‘the action of lying or pressing upon’.[[7]](#footnote-7) The passive verbs—‘be-virtu’d,—be-pictur’d,—be-butterflied’—suggest however a pleasure arising as much from suffering as from doing.

In *Tristram* *Shandy* knowledge is thus advanced and exchanged intimately and corporeally on several occasions and between a number of different principals. In *Tristram Shandy* (which differs in this from *A Sentimental Journey*) these are interchanges less sentimental than sexual. ‘Let no man say’, as our narrator points out,

from what taggs and jaggs hints may not be cut out for the advancement of human knowlege. Let no man who has read my father’s first and second beds of justice, ever rise up and say again, from collision of what kinds of bodies, light may, or may not be struck out, to carry the arts and sciences up to perfection.— (6.26)

Conceptions as well as misconceptions arise, fortuitously and unpredictably, from the collision of bodies. Tristram’s father’s first and second beds of justice occur, at a day’s interval, bracketing a monthly exchange of just this kind, and involve communication, or more usually miscommunication, between himself and Mrs Shandy. (The substance of that communication, and its outcome, is of course a topic for anguished and extended discussion and debate.) Similarly, the revelation of the collapse of Toby’s courtship, and its cause, is rapidly communicated by trade through a sequence of intermediaries, by a number of vehicles, and for a variety of small considerations:

Susannah was sufficient by herself … in exporting a family secret; for she instantly imparted it by signs to Jonathan—and Jonathan by tokens to the cook, as she was basting a loin of mutton; the cook sold it with some kitchen fat to the postillion for a groat, who truck’d it with the dairy maid for something of about the same value— (9. 32)

In the world of Shandy Hall information, if not fungible like current coin, nevertheless normally has a more or less agreed exchange value. It may be exported, imparted, sold, and trucked, by signs or tokens, in the common course of life, for a groat or a groat’s equivalent, as a clean purchase or in part exchange. It is as readily passed from hand to hand or from ear to ear as a starling, or the fragment of a notary’s tale, or, perhaps most conspicuously, the reports of a stranger’s curious nose.

Walter’s is not however the only possible notion of knowledge, and alternatives are stated within *Tristram Shandy*, if not (for the book is a satire) at equal length. ‘True Shandeism’, explicitly, does not prioritise trade at the expense of the human. Tristram as narrator insists ‘Was I left like Sancho Pança to chuse my kingdom, it should not be maritime—or a kingdom of blacks to make a penny of’ (4. 32). Yorick the Parson would be an obvious choice for a ‘hearty laughing subject’ of that kingdom. Yorick is not a numbers man, and, though he has a sense of humour, has little sense of worldly business. Careless of the costs of his jesting, the myriad grains and scruples of indebtedness mount up against his account to a tidy sum. Even the commerce of wit involves assuming an obligation which, literally and materially, will end with the borrower’s death:

[the Mortgager] raises a sum and [the Mortgagée] a laugh at your expence, and think no more about it. Interest, however, still runs on in both cases;—… till, at length …—pop comes the creditor upon each, and by demanding principal upon the spot, together with full interest to the very day … my Hero … had wantonly involved himself in a multitude of small book-debts of this stamp, which … he too much disregarded … Eugenius … would often tell him, that one day or other he would certainly be reckoned with …—to the uttermost mite. (1. 12)

This is much in tune with the ongoing figurative discourse of trade and exchange in *Tristram Shandy*. The passage’s concluding word, however, inescapably recalls the parable of the widow’s mite, another discourse, and another ethos, in which exact monetary equivalence is trumped by moral considerations. Here Jesus sees ‘the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury’, and ‘a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites’ (the widow’s mite is a coin, the *lepton*, which was the least valuable unit of currency then in circulation in Palestine). The rich men can afford to pay an offering from their abundance; ‘but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had’ (Luke, 21. 2-4). Her contribution, though much the smaller, is much the more valuable. The heavenly reckoning which awaits the widow differs from the earthly reckoning which, the more worldly Eugenius warns, awaits Yorick. In the first the values are relative; in the second, fixed.

The deathbed conversation with Eugenius is not the only moment in *Tristram Shandy* at which Yorick is associated with or expresses such a dismissal of a merely commercial arithmetic, and such an insistence on moral or spiritual worth and usefulness. Yorick’s is not only a good-humoured but also a practical and a moral science. When Walter Shandy threatens to appeal, in addressing the arguments *pro* and *con* circumcision, to ‘our best polemic divines’, Yorick at once intervenes. Preferring to judge by quality than by quantity, Yorick weighs their cargoes of scholastic learning in the balance and finds them wanting. He wishes that ‘there was not a polemic divine in the kingdom’ and insists that ‘one ounce of practical divinity is worth a painted ship load of all their reverences have imported these fifty years’ (5. 28).

Much has been said about what Sterne himself calls ‘sentimental commerce’ (*ASJ*, p. 13). This commerce sometimes attaches to objects physically possessed and exchanged. David Fairer, in a vital article, remarks that ‘The sentimental exchange is conscious of … decisive subjectivities, where an object acquires value and meaning by engaging with an individual human mind’.[[8]](#footnote-8) More often, ‘sentimental commerce’ occurs in the direct intercourse between individuals. Such ‘benevolent commerce’, as Sterne describes it in his second sermon, may take place genuinely at a death bed, or more questionably at a remise door, or in a glove shop. The instances of commerce I have been discussing are of a different kind. Walter Shandy’s possessive intimacies with Bruscambille and Slawkenbergius involve sympathetic communion with no other human being. His communications with Mrs Shandy in his Beds of Justice are instances of something opposite to human understanding. The pilgrimage of a proverb across two continents is the transport of an object, not a human thought. The ‘bewitching phantom of Knowledge’ pursued by Toby and Walter turns out to be a Lamia rather than a lady. It has been suggested by a recent editor of *A Sentimental Journey* that Sterne’s use of such phrases as ‘benevolent commerce’ refer to ‘kindly interaction, rather than simple trade’, and the editor continues, parenthetically, to suggest that ‘(the metaphor … implicitly gives value to trade)’.[[9]](#footnote-9) The metaphor of commerce is used by Sterne, however, in different ways in different places. Sterne’s use of the metaphor does not seem to this reader, as far as *Tristram Shandy* is concerned, very sympathetic to trade, commerce and markets, their values or their practices, opening or otherwise.

1. This paper was delivered in a panel on Sterne at ISECS Rotterdam 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Barry, ‘An Academic Discipline Foresees its Death’, *PN Review*, 173 (2007), 1-20 (p. 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Rates of Exchange* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983), pp. 8, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *TS*, 5. 12. 440-1; see *TS Notes,* p. 361-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *TS Notes*, pp. 361-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Or rather, as is argued by John Locke, from whom Sterne stole the argument (*Of Civil Government*, 2. 5. 27-8, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: CUPO, 1966), pp. 305-6. See *TS Notes*, p. 264). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Oxford English Dictionary*, which cites this passage as its sole illustrative example. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Sentimental Translation in Mackenzie and Sterne’, *Essays in Criticism*, 49 (1999), 132-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Katherine Turner, ed., *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2010), p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)