

# Cyborgs Not Welcome: Sterne's Reimagining of Machines and Sentiment in *Tristram Shandy*

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Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* begins with mechanics interrupted. Once a month, Tristram's parents scheduled their sex with the winding of their grandfather clock, but on the occasion of Tristram's conception, his mother interrupts in the middle of their embrace: "Pray, my dear... have you not forgot to wind up the clock? Good G--d! cried my father... Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?"<sup>1</sup> Their clockwork sex is unhinged by Mrs. Shandy's wandering mind and her husband's annoyance, and Tristram believes the interruption set his life wrong from the start. Thus, in the opening scene, we find a main tension of the novel: the balance between predictable, programmatic mechanization and wandering, emotional minds.

Critics have long struggled to articulate the unique, Shandean mix of mechanical and sentimental in the novel. Is Tristram fully a product of the mechanical paradigm, acting as a type of cyborgian narrator? Or is this a sentimental novel with overflowing, random feeling? Perhaps Sterne is mixing them, creating a bold new blend of the two. Though critics differ on the answer, there is consensus that *Tristram Shandy* meditates deeply on the balance between machine and sentiment in eighteenth century fiction, at a time when book production was quickly becoming mechanized. Through his satiric novel, Sterne engages in active critique of the Enlightenment and its attitudes towards machinery and sentiment. As Melvyn New writes,

<sup>1</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

"Sterne's importance has been to keep alive an opposition to the new drummer [of the Enlightenment], a stubborn way of looking at contradiction within a context."<sup>2</sup> *Tristram Shandy* looks at the contradiction of machine and sentiment, stubborn enough to refuse to reduce or blend the two.

I argue that, in *Tristram Shandy*, mechanics are used as a tool to enable the narrator and author to better communicate sentiment, but not replace it. Sterne does not blend mechanics with emotion. Instead, he keeps the difference between the two distinct while using them in conjunction. Sterne's balance of sentiment and mechanics is not only innovative in the eighteenth century, but also suited for bridging deeper and more personal connections between the work and audience. The Shandean approach is uniquely able to reach readers by both presenting familiar sentiment and giving them a place to apply their own experiences, resulting in deep connection to the text. Through *Tristram*, he gives readers a new paradigm for how to keep their feeling hearts in a world that values unfeeling mechanics.

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Written from 1759 to 1767 and published in installments, *Tristram Shandy* was created in the midst of the Enlightenment, a European movement of intellectual thought characterized by rationality and reason-based value systems. The volatile field of science was influential in shaping the Enlightenment, bringing its emphasis on cause and effect and logic. Science was advanced by the new technological progress of machinery, an influence that expanded beyond the realm of natural philosophy into society at large. As John Tresch argues, "Machines in the

<sup>2</sup> Melvyn New, *Tristram Shandy: A Book for Free Spirits* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 22.

eighteenth century were often seen to embody the promises of reason and enlightenment."<sup>3</sup>

Tresch uses the word "promises" because this redefining of paradigms was just beginning, and society was eager for some source of stability in the midst of a new mechanical world. Machines were no longer limited to cogs and springs. They began to redefine what it meant to be human, seen most strikingly in Julien Offray de La Mettrie's *Man a Machine* (1748), a work that argued human sentiment is caused only by the mechanics of the body. La Mettrie, a French physician, believed the brain to be a "spring" like any other muscle, arguing, "It is the source of all our feelings, all our pleasures, all our passions and all our thoughts; for the brain has muscles for thinking as the legs do for walking."<sup>4</sup> Our feelings were nothing more than the logical, mechanical workings of the body: even rash passions and sudden violent fits. To La Mettrie, no aspect of feeling could not be explained and reproduced mechanically.

As works that dealt in sentiment, novels especially faced challenges in defining their relationships with machines. In the eighteenth century, the form of the novel was already grappling with self-reflection and definition. Strange new machinery brought pesky questions about the nature of man, leading to increased tension about the form of the novel. As Alex Wetmore points out, "Literature was undergoing radical transformations brought about by the rapid expansion of print technology and the widespread access to mechanically reproduced copies of texts and images."<sup>5</sup> The book was becoming aware of itself as a piece of text created on a machine, an awareness that challenged what it meant to be a novel. Could it still be an art

<sup>3</sup> John Tresch, "The Machine Awakens: The Science and Politics of the Fantastic Automaton," *French Historical Studies* 34.1 (2011), 87. EBSCOhost.

<sup>4</sup> Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Man-Machine*, ed. Jonathan Bennett, (2009), 24, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/lamettrie1748.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Wetmore, "Sympathy Machines: Men of Feeling and the Automaton," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43.1 (2009), 42. DOI: 10.1353/ecs.0.0083.

form if language, print, and book were all becoming mechanical tools? With books printed in droves for mass audiences, it seemed the dilution and mechanization of sentiment was inevitable. Novelists began to question not only how their works were reproduced, but their goals; as Joseph Drury asks, "How does narrative work in the century of Julien Offray de La Mettrie's machine man?"<sup>6</sup> It seemed that if books could be made into machines of both form and content, then the sentiment they contained could be similarly mechanized. But not all authors went gently into the gears and wheels of mechanical novels. As Drury argues, "*Tristram Shandy* might be read as resistant to some of the cultural and literary developments of the mid-eighteenth century."<sup>7</sup> However, I argue that Drury actually underestimates the extent to which Sterne worked against the mechanization of the novel. *Tristram Shandy* actively critiques Enlightenment attitudes towards mechanization and creates its own paradigm for how mechanization can contribute to the communication of sentiment, not replace it.

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To understand Sterne's reaction to the growing pressure to mechanize, it is useful first to examine how mechanization without sentiment fails in his novel to connect characters and readers. Sterne presents these instances of failure as reminders to the reader of the limits of mechanism. By highlighting these limits, Sterne prepares readers to consider the merits of his sentiment-friendly approach in *Tristram Shandy*.

On the level of characters, mechanism often fails to establish a deeper connection between reader and novel. The reader learns to distrust the supposedly logical progression and

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Drury, "The Novel and the Machine in the Eighteenth Century," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42.2 (2009), 338, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=3e3f6ba3-6952-407e-9cef-65810eff6fde%40sessionmgr114&vid=17&hid=120>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

justification of character actions, questioning, by extent, the supposed supremacy of mechanical thought. For example, Sterne satirizes Walter, Tristram's father, who is fanatical about predestination of people's bodies and names. Tristram shows readers that his father is a grossly amplified representation of the Enlightenment obsession with reason, saying, "He was systematical, and like all systematick reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture everything in nature to support his hypothesis."<sup>8</sup> Walter believes deeply in logical cause and effect between human bodies, names, and lives, going as far as to argue that the prominence of one's nose (or phallus) determined one's fate. This is La Mettrie's mechanical man to an extreme. Yet, for all Walter's belief in the rational machinery of human life, Tristram is still given a cursed nose and name. But because of the autobiographical nature of the novel, the reader acknowledges, however implicitly, that Tristram's worth is not fully determined by Walter's standards. When the reader commits to 500 pages of Tristram's authorship, she reaffirms Tristram's worth in one way or another, thereby undermining Walter's logical system, and, by extension, the Enlightenment project of mechanized human behavior. Through this example, Sterne encourages the reader to begin to question the ability of mechanical systems to live up to their promises of fully capturing human life, a move that makes his own use of mechanics all the more appealing.

Sterne also mocks the urge to mechanize text extensively in the novel's structure and form, showing that the tools of machinery alone cannot connect the reader to the novel. At points, Tristram seems to have a grand plan for its structure, sounding as if he were creating a well-oiled machine where each part fit its exact function. As he explains one textual choice to

<sup>8</sup> Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, 45.

the reader, "I have dropp'd the curtain over this scene for a minute—to remind you of one thing—and to inform you of another."<sup>9</sup> This breaking of the novel's pacing and the scene interrupts the moment so the narrator can fill in some gaps in our knowledge. His careful explanation of his actions sounds perfectly logical and rational, fitting for an Enlightenment man. His digressions are explained as parts of the machine of the novel, all essential for it to function and achieve its goal of connecting to the reader. In that instance, we must be "reminded" of something not as an irrelevant aside, but as requisite information for our full understanding of the scene at hand. However, as Viktor Shklovsky points out, "The first impression of a reader who picks up *Tristram Shandy* is that the novel is chaos. The action is interrupted constantly; the author continually retreats or jumps ahead; the basic story, which is hard to find in the first place, is constantly interrupted by lengthy digressions concerning odd topics."<sup>10</sup> As the absurdity of *Tristram Shandy's* structure becomes clear, the reader is forced to recognize that the machine of the book, as Tristram presents it, is breaking down, despite his pretensions otherwise. As Shklovsky explains, "Sterne seems to manipulate and expose the novel's very structure: formal devices and structural relations made perceptible by violating their normal employment make up the very content of the novel."<sup>11</sup> The reader is "exposed" to the machine of the narrative in a manner that isolates and pushes them away from the plot. When we are escorted too aggressively around the text, we reject it, finding only the "chaos" Shklovsky speaks of. In these hyper-mechanized moments of form, we become too aware of

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>10</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, "A Parodying Novel: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*," in *Laurence Sterne*, ed. John Traugott, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 66.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 69.

structure, interrupting our sentimental connection with the narrator. Sterne proves in moments of mechanical satire like these that readers want a sentimental experience, not to see every cog.

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Thus, Sterne proves through two levels of the novel that machinery alone creates a shallow, unsatisfying experience for the reader. Accepting that, it is tempting to propose then that Sterne's mockery of machinery is an argument for fully sentimental novels. Though Sterne will later make important contributions to the sentimental novel with his 1768 *A Sentimental Journey*, *Tristram Shandy* cannot be read as a sentimental novel alone. Many critics have argued, then, that *Tristram Shandy* blends or melds sentiment with machine, but this analysis is also problematic. Sterne gives both mechanical and sentimental their full due in their own separate spheres, using mechanics as tools to share sentiment with the reader. Mechanics alone cannot carry the novel, yet sentiment depends on mechanics to be communicated. One cannot function without another, but neither can they be blended into a new feeling machine.

Sterne explores this relationship between machines and sentiment on many levels, including the level of character interactions. For example, Widow Wadman exemplifies Sterne's use of mechanics as a tool to achieve sentimental communication. Living next door to Uncle Toby, she had fallen in love, but needed a way to get his attention away from machines. Toby is frequently mentioned to the reader in conjunction with the war machines which become his obsession. Toby is so devoted to his machines that he strips Tristram's nursery window of its lead weights, later causing Tristram's accidental circumcision. Mrs. Wadman adopts the mechanics of war into her strategy, using mechanical strategies and actions to approach Toby. As Tristram writes, "Mrs. Wadman silently sallied forth from her arbour, replaced the pin in her

mob, pass'd the wicker gate, and advanced slowly towards my uncle Toby's sentry-box."<sup>12</sup> She does not walk, but "advances," a verb that is meant to remind us of battalions functioning as one unit, as cogs in a war machine. Sterne uses Widow Wadman's attempt to woo Toby to show that machines don't have to replace sentiment or exist in opposition to it. For Widow Wadman, the mechanics of war gave her a way to organize her feelings and share them with Toby, but did not replace her attraction to him. Through her actions, Sterne shows readers that mechanics can be used to help facilitate sentiment and communicate it to others.

However, the mechanics of their affair can only get them so far with their sentiment: the tools of machine remain tools, not able to fully replace messy, confusing human emotion and desire. Toby and Widow Wadman find this irreducible gap between mechanism and sentiment when their war mechanics finally succeed in getting them together. When describing Toby's approach to Widow Wadman's house, Tristram says only "Let us go into the house," a line followed by two blank pages. When the story finally resumes, it does so with asterisks in place of conversation, and the conversation we do see is awkward miscommunication. Tristram reports their halted conversation: "You shall see the very place, Madam; said my Uncle Toby. Mrs. Wadman blush'd-look'd towards the door- turn'd pale-blush'd slightly again-recovered her natural colour..."<sup>13</sup> The lack of communication from the narrator to the reader and the halted, blushing flirtation between Widow Wadman and Toby remind the reader that, however successful the tools of machine are in communicating sentiment, there are limits to what the tools, whether they be of novel structure or war mechanics of romantic attack, can accomplish. Indeed, in the end, their love affair is bungled through miscommunication. Toby, ever thinking

<sup>12</sup> Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, 464.

<sup>13</sup> Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. 504.

mechanically, believes Widow Wadman wants to see a map of the battle in which he hurt his groin: an object of much more interest to the widow than war. The reader is again reminded by the struggling love affair that too much faith in mechanics will not facilitate sentimental communication. Instead, it is a balance of the two that will succeed.

Though communication between characters may not always be successful, the Shandean use of sentiment and machine is compelling for spectators, as proved by the urge of Tristram's parents to spy on the budding love affair. They're willing to stay and watch for as long as the interaction takes, even though they can't be seeing much from across the garden.<sup>14</sup> It does not matter how long it takes to watch because this love affair is something worth watching. The fascination of Tristram's parents mirrors the reader's own connection to the characters and their exchange of sentiment, pulling us in despite awkward moments. We are compelled to watch, even fill in the blanks on the conversation Tristram leaves as asteriks, because we have plenty of sentiment in our own lives that can inform the scene. We see our own lives echoed in this mix of mechanics and sentiment and the struggle to balance the two.

Seeing the characters use mechanics and sentiment to communicate with each other, readers are also reminded that this same relationship exists within the narrator's hand creating the text. The narrator's (mis)use of his pen and constant reference to it as a tool forces readers to realize what they read is the product of a handheld machine. As William Mottolese claims, "The text of his *Life and Opinions* is the locus at which the instrument of the pen enables the body (hand and arm) to express or communicate the mind."<sup>15</sup> Mottolese argues that Tristram's book

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 500.

<sup>15</sup>William Mottolese, "Tristram Cyborg and Toby Toolmaker: Body, Tools and Hobbyhorse in *Tristram Shandy*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 47.3 (2007), 690, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4625132>

depends on the pen that "enables" it, a machine that Mottolese credits with the accomplishment of the novel. Tristram himself seems aware of the tool, and he constantly references his pen, saying in one instance, "My pen takes its course; and I write on as much from the fullness of my heart, as my stomach."<sup>16</sup> In many ways, Mottolese is correct to highlight the pen as an important symbolic machine in *Tristram Shandy*. But Mottolese overemphasizes the connection between machine and sentimental bodies - he wants to show that Tristram is a cyborg, a complete mixing of machine and sentiment. Mottolese argues, "the pen becomes an appendage or prosthetic extension of a human being who always seems to be writing."<sup>17</sup> But in *Tristram Shandy*, the pen gets its own verb—it "takes" its path while Tristram "writes on"—which serves to separate it from the body that moves it. For all its self-direction, it only functions because Tristram is there to operate it, writing from his "heart and stomach." Unlike La Mettrie's human-machine, Tristram's heart exists separate from his body, justifying it being listed separate from his stomach, which is in turn listed separately from the pen. In Sterne's novel, machine and sentiment have their own spheres of influence. Though they work together to communicate to the reader, they are not one and the same; Tristram does not become a cyborg. Instead, he is a human with human sentiment who uses machines to try to capture that sentiment and communicate it to others.

By keeping the pen a machine and Tristram a sentimental human, Sterne takes his approach to machines and sentiment—a mix he has proven both successful and compelling—and shows readers they can apply this method as they navigate their own lives in the new

<sup>16</sup> Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, 351.

<sup>17</sup> Mottolese, "Tristram Cyborg and Toby Toolmaker: Body, Tools and Hobbyhorse in *Tristram Shandy*," 690.

world of hyper-logical machines. *Tristram Shandy* is an autobiography of a man who is by all counts nothing special: he makes mistakes, has a wandering mind, and has been involved in physical mishap. Even in the title of the book, he is defined only as a gentleman, a fairly generic term. As readers, we can easily imagine ourselves into his position and begin to imagine writing our own autobiographies. Sterne could have picked any tool for his argument about the separation of feeling men and machines, but he chose a pen. The pen is one of the most common tools used nearly every day, so readers have ample opportunity to internalize the distinction Sterne makes each time we use one.

Not only does Sterne show readers how sentiment and machines can coexist in their own lives, but he gives us the chance to practice in the novel. In meta-moments, Tristram reaches out to the readers, asking them to engage with his textual experimentation. For example, Sterne periodically inserts extra-textual pages of visual manipulation. In the first volume, a page is completely black.<sup>18</sup> Coming after several passages on the death of Yorick, the reader is faced with a page filled with ink, a technique that reminds them that what they read was created on a machine. Yet this black page gives the reader the opportunity to pause, to consider the enormity of grief the narrator feels for Yorick. There are no words to suggest how they should feel, so readers must draw upon their own feelings to connect with the sentiment the narrator wants to represent. Later, Sterne calls upon the reader again, not only refusing to fill in the experience for the reader, but leaving space completely blank. In the sixth volume, Tristram is trying to describe how attracted Uncle Toby is to Widow Wadman. Tristram urges the reader to use the following blank page to draw their own conception of a mistress. Tristram

<sup>18</sup> Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, 29.

writes, "To conceive this right-call for pen and ink—here's paper ready to your hand—sit down, sir, paint her to your own mind...please but your own fancy in it."<sup>19</sup> The creation of the blank page is fully mechanical, and reminds the reader that what they hold is a physical book created by printing presses. But Sterne believes that readers have sentiments that cannot be reproduced by machines, so he gives us the blank page, trusting our ability to express our unique, feeling hearts in the midst of mechanism.

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Sterne's use of the mechanical to communicate the sentimental is not only successful with audiences, but is also a unique method in the eighteenth century. His contemporaries often completely embraced the mechanization of sentiment, resulting in shallow connections and limited audience engagement. Consider the work of Eliza Haywood, a prolific novelist and playwright whose work often featured female heroines. Haywood's characters, as Drury writes, became "mechanical characters."<sup>20</sup> In *Fantomina* (1725), the leading lady dons disguise after disguise, repeatedly removing her identity as she becomes a gentleman-chasing machine. Haywood's embrace of machinery creates a mechanical experience for the reader. As Drury argues, "Because [the characters] are depicted as desiring machines that cannot be blamed for involuntary and unavoidable actions, the readers who identify with them benefit from the same freedom."<sup>21</sup> This "freedom" is fundamentally different than the freedom available in Sterne's work. In Haywood's novel, the characters are modeled per La Mettrie's mechanical man, controlled by sentiments that are all part of the logical system of the body. Readers are not

<sup>19</sup> Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, 376.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Drury, "Haywood's Thinking Machines," *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 21.2 (2008): 203.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

encouraged to explore their own unique sentiments, but instead, they are absorbed into the mechanical characters and become machines themselves. The connection Haywood's audience has to her novels is much more prescribed than the connection available in *Tristram Shandy*. In *Tristram Shandy*, the reader is not encouraged to function as a machine, but rather, to use the tools of machine to allow them to access both the presented sentiment and add their own to the work.

The distinctions between different ways of explaining Sterne's use of mechanical and sentimental may seem small. In the end, does it matter that Sterne keeps mechanical and sentimental separate? To weigh the answer to that question, let us consider again La Mettrie's machine man. If La Mettrie's claim that every aspect of human nature is mechanical, including wild fits of passion, is true, then the implications for human life and free will are dire. Such a conception of human life is devastating for art, religion and creativity. *Tristram Shandy's* careful distinction between mechanics and sentiment is not only capable of creating novels that speak deeply to readers, but also of arguing against La Mettrie. Readers' engagement and connection to Sterne's work proves that his belief in machines as limited tools to communicate sentiment is a belief many hold—that mechanics, while useful to share sentiment, cannot fully replace the breadth and depth of human emotion and thought. *Tristram Shandy* deconstructs La Mettrie's machine man, proving to the eighteenth century that humans are more than machines and providing the literary world with a new paradigm for moving forward in the age of the Enlightenment.