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The Rhythmical Pattern of *Tristram Shandy*

Goethe, in his eighties, made the following comment on Sterne, in one of his letters: '... he tends to formlessness...'; and then he also added: '... the essence of real humour is the formlessness...'.¹ It may seem that Goethe's opinion on the author of *A Sentimental Journey* agrees substantially with that of many men of letters of the 1760s to the 1780s, beginning with Samuel Johnson.

But, unlike their judgements, Goethe's opinion is neutral in estimation. This idea of Sterne's novel as being 'chaotic' and 'formless' became firmly established in Victorian literary criticism and was adopted by Sternian critics at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The question of the rhythm of Sterne's prose was never examined. On the other hand, remarks on the 'spasmodic' character of the novel,² or the comment that it is 'technically a hotch-potch'³ still remain unexplained metaphors and cannot be regarded as valid.

In the most recent criticism there have appeared some interesting observations about Sterne's artistic time (scheme)⁴ but his rhythm has not been touched upon. And it is not possible to find Sterne mentioned in books dealing with rhythm of prose on the basis of English literature.⁵ However, a close investigation of the rhythm of both of Sterne's novels, especially *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is worth undertaking.

It has often been noticed that one of Sterne's most popular narrative devices is a sudden break in the flow of narration. In spite of this intermittence Sterne's prose cannot be defined as 'rhythmically neutral'.⁶ The reader finds rhythmically organized passages of different lengths, which can be regarded as verse rhythms. Not without reason was he called 'the chief master of prose melos'⁷ by Northrop Frye.

The Canadian scholar, though, has not furnished examples to illustrate his judgement, but this gap can easily be filled. For example, the last phrase of *A Sentimental Journey* ('So that when I stretched out my hand, I caught hold of the fille de chambre') is rhythmical and even metrical. We also come across examples of rhythmically organized prose in Sterne's first novel. One of the paragraphs of the 26th chapter of the eighth volume starts with an iambic line: 'He took it like a lamb - I say!'. (Equirhythmical lines can be met, for instance, in Kipling's 'Tommy'.) And finally the italicized description of Widow Wadman's feelings in the 20th chapter of the ninth volume is given in *vers libre*.

But the problem of the rhythmical organization of Sterne's prose cannot be, of course, narrowed to the analysis of certain rhythmically organized passages. As M. Girshman correctly states, 'the unity of the rhythmical movement is not confined to a limited linguistic sphere in prose'.⁸

It would also be interesting to observe manifestations of rhythm on other levels for its organizing role in the spatial-temporal continuum of the novel regarded as an artistic entity in the most 'irregular' (according to the traditional opinion) of Sterne's books, *Tristram Shandy*.⁹

The writer himself called his book 'rhapsodic', referring to its raggedness. By this remark Sterne,

¹ Goethe, *Werke* (Weimar, 1908), vol. 46, pp. 193-4.

² See, e.g. Alice Green Fredman, *Diderot and Sterne* (New York, 1955), p. 160.

³ Arthur Calder-Marshall, 'Laurence Sterne' in *The English Novelists: A Survey of the Novel by Twenty Contemporary Novelists*, ed. by D. Verschole (London, 1936), pp. 81-95.

⁴ See, e.g. Jean-Jacques Mayoux, 'Variations on the Time-scheme in *Tristram Shandy*' in 'The Winged Skull': *Papers from the Laurence Sterne bicentenary conference* (London, 1971), pp. 3-20.

⁵ See, e.g. Paul Franklin Baum, *The other harmony of prose. An Essay in English prose rhythm* (Duke University Press, 1952).

⁶ V. M. Zhirmunsky's expression: see V. Zhirmunskij, *Teorija stiha* (Leningrad, 1975), p. 586. (References here and elsewhere to Russian titles and names are transliterated.)

⁷ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1973), p. 266.

⁸ M. Girshman, 'Ritm i celostnost' prozaicheskogo hudozhestvennogo proizvedeniya, - *Voprosy literatury* (Moskva, 1974), 11, p. 130.

⁹ Cf. John Dunlop's judgement (1816) of *Tristram Shandy*: '... nothing can be more irregular' (quoted in Alan B. Howes, *Yorick and the Critics. Sterne's Reputation in England, 1760-1868*. (New Haven, 1958), p. 135.

as if intentionally, gave his critics the ground to accuse his book of formlessness, and even 'arrhythmia'. This arrhythmia is manifested here:

(1) by the unequal size of chapters: there are chapters covering a dozen pages and those which are equal to a paragraph and even a phrase;

(2) by sudden changes of imaginary addressees. Sterne calls them My Lord, friend, madame, gentlemen, my dear Jenny, Eugenius, etc.;

(3) by allowing one of his imaginary addressees to take over narration, although the latter is not one of the characters of the novel;

(4) by rearranging the order of chapters, as in the last volume;

(5) by purely graphical means.

As is well known, rhythm is based on repetition. Such a phenomenon might seem impossible in the artistic system of the novel, when the author deliberately aims at perplexing the reader and disappointing his expectations. However, we do still come across this phenomenon in *Tristram Shandy*. For example, there are certain phrases repeatedly used in each of the volumes to depict characters of the novel. There is Uncle Toby's exclamation in several chapters of the third volume: 'What prodigious armies you had in Flanders!' or the words 'Imagine to yourself' at the end of different chapters in the second volume; or Bridget's words (the ninth volume), 'And I'll let him as much as he will'.

Uncle Toby is described as whistling the popular tune 'Lillabullero' in several episodes of similar semantic loading. The foreword to the novel ('Dedication to Mr. Pitt') is varied in different volumes. On the compositional level repetition is manifested by the inclusion of sermons in the beginning of the chapters – the so-called 'Holy beginnings'.¹⁰ And finally, in the plot there is a repeated motif, that of the misfortunes haunting Tristram: there are the irregularities of his conception, birth, naming and, due to a tragic accident (the fall of the window frame), his undergoing the alien, non-Christian rite.

Though the chain of similar examples could be prolonged, examples of this kind should be treated as occasional where the element of unexpected digressions, sudden breaks in the narrative and unprepared introduction of new associations dominates. Regularity exhibited in separate examples in the novel is suppressed by predominating irregularity. However, this fact does not allow us to come to a conclusion about the 'arrhythmia' of *Tristram Shandy*.

Contemporary musicology distinguishes (in its most general division) between two types of rhythm:

(1) regular rhythms, in which regularity prevails, while irregularity plays a subordinate role;

(2) irregular rhythms, in which regularity is subordinate to irregular rhythmical patterns.¹¹

The phenomenon resembling 'arrhythmia' in Sterne's novel is nothing other than the second type mentioned above. In such rhythm the logic of the rhythmical process is shown by a movement from a lesser irregularity to a greater one and back again to a lesser irregularity. This is the kind of logic which can be found in *Tristram Shandy*.

A gradual growth of regularity can be observed in the first two parts of the novel, where description of Shandy-Hall with its stable way of life occupies much space. The opposite tendency characterizes the third and fourth volumes, containing a great number of digressions and interpolated stories. The fifth and the sixth volumes are marked by a greater temporal stability, the time of Tristram the narrator prevailing here: another transition from a lesser to a greater regularity. The breach of continuity of the narration becomes more conspicuous in the succeeding two volumes and ultimately the atmosphere of the ninth volume is characterized by the utmost degree of irregularity (along all the parameters).

Sterne's partiality for all kinds of digressions, producing an effect of irregularity, is well known. Viktor Shklovsky made an interesting observation about this peculiarity of the writer's prose:

The reader expects continuous narration but meets digressions instead, the writer keeping him in suspense and encouraging his anticipation of the return to the principal subject, by means of reiteration of the same phrase, which recalls the preceding scene.¹²

¹⁰ For details see John Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1954).

¹¹ V. N. Holopova, 'Formoobrazujushaja rol "ritma v muzykal" nom proizvedenii'; in *Ritm, prostranstvo i vremja v literaturie i iskusstve* (Leningrad, 1974), p. 231.

¹² Viktor Shklovskii, *Povesti o prozie* (Moskva, 1966) vol. 1, p. 216.

This observation is associated with the motion of expectation: 'a certain event causes anticipation of another and that is the criterion of the rhythm'.¹³

In this connection we can conclude that this kind of 'breach of expectation' in *Tristram Shandy* presents a rhythmical unit, and rhythmical development proceeds from one breach to another. The rhythmical system of the first type (with prevailing regularity) is to a certain extent characteristic of the way of life in Shandy-Hall, where Walter Shandy winds the clock on the first Sunday of every month. But in practically every chapter the anticipated continuation of the story about Shandy-Hall is interrupted, and from the regulated world the reader is transferred into the world of dominating irregularity.

'The rhythm of irregularity' undoubtedly plays a very important role in organizing the system of spatial-temporal relationships (or 'chronotopos' as M. Bakhtin calls it) in Sterne's novel. However, it is only to the regulated world of Shandy-Hall that a rather interesting definition of Bakhtin applies, but even here regularity is sometimes interrupted.

Intermediate chronotopos of a puppet theatre, though in a disguised form, makes the basis for *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne's spirit is that of a wooden puppet guided by and commented by the author.¹⁴

He also characterizes Sterne's chronotopos as Rabelaisian-idyllic.

With all respect for the precision of Bakhtin's definitions, it should be observed that both characterize not all of the Sternian chronotopos, but only that part of it which radiates a network of associations, interrupting the reader's expectation.

The mechanism of the development of these associations presents a special interest.

On the one hand associations may develop along the *spatial axis*, as they do, for instance, in the associative movement from Uncle Toby's shooting range to the town of Namur, from real space to paper (or narrative) space – it is the way in which the motif of the travelling in France (in the imagination of the author's characters) appears in the fifth volume, etc.

Sometimes the spatial analogy, along which the association develops, assumes a grotesque character. Thus, for example, the siege of Namur – a real fact from Uncle Toby's militant past – is associated in a most grotesque manner with the Biblical siege of Jericho, Uncle Toby's favourite episode in the Bible.

Moreover, associations may develop along the *temporal axis*.

The artistic time limits of the novel are quite extensive – from the siege of Namur in 1695 to 12 August 1766, when the grown Tristram casts a retrospective glance at his childhood at Shandy-Hall.¹⁵ It is within these limits that frequent temporal leaps occur, the author invariably accounting for them by the subjectivity of time perception. This explanation accounts for the leaps of time from the siege of Namur to Uncle Toby's courtship of Widow Wadman, from Tristram the baby to Tristram the man. It is not surprising either that only at the end of the fourth volume does the author write: 'it is from this point properly, that the story of my *Life* and my *Opinions* sets out' – calling forth an additional association with the beginning of the novel.

The streams of spatial and temporal associations do not only alternate but also intersect with one another. This is how, for example, Sterne begins chapter 28 of the fourth volume:

Now this is the most puzzled skin of all – for in the last chapter, as far at least as it has helped me through Auxerre I have been getting forwards in two different journeys together...

Sterne means journeys in space and time. In the 19th chapter of the eighth volume to Corporal Trim's question: '...has a soldier an' please your honour, to know any thing at all of geography?' – Uncle Toby replies: 'Thou wouldst have said chronology. Trim...'

At first it may seem that such intersections violate the peculiar rhythm of alternation of the spatial and temporal associations. But the violation is an imaginary one. These intersections, as a rule, give birth to new, *third-type associations*, which are being developed in the sphere of philosophical meditations, apart from the spatial and temporal co-ordinates. A similar associative stream is represented by the discussion of noses, and in Walter Shandy's letter to Uncle Toby (the eighth volume), by the interpolated story about the abbess (the seventh volume), by the dialogue of Francis I with the prime minister (the fourth volume), etc.

¹³ Abraham Moles, *Théorie de l'information et perception esthétique* (Paris, Flammarion, 1958), p. 96.

¹⁴ M. Bakhtin, *Voprosy literaturny i estetiki* (Moskva, 1975), p. 315.

¹⁵ See Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago & London, 1975), p. 223.

These philosophical (or quasi-philosophical) associations may be of different extent and may be interrupted by a full stop or dots at the end of the chapter or by a new association of temporal or spatial nature. Thus, after the profound philosophical meditations on debts in the 17th chapter of the ninth volume there comes the comment; 'True philosophy – but there is no treating the subject whilst my uncle is whistling "Lillabullero"'. Let us go into the house'.

Sometimes there is a reverse flow of associations. This can be illustrated by Walter Shandy's words in the fifth volume: '...I am convinced, Yorick... that there is a North-west passage to the intellectual world...'

If in the textual analysis we exclude the non-associative descriptions of life at Shandy-Hall, which are not extensive ones, the remaining larger part of the narrative represents a rather regular alternation of the previously mentioned associations. Each pair of associations of the first two types (their order may be different) is followed, as a rule by a more lengthy association of the third type, which sometimes passes on from one chapter into another. It is natural that this regularity is of a dependent nature, however, it enables us to speak of the 'rhythm of associations'.¹⁶

More than 50 years ago Viktor Shklovsky wrote of *Tristram Shandy's* plot as developed *without fabula*.¹⁷ To my mind, it is the interaction of associative streams, marked by an original rhythmical pattern, on which the development of Sterne's plot is based.

In his work on Sterne D. Jefferson stated that in spite of Sterne being a highly individual writer he had always followed the noble commandments of his age: 'order, proportion and a regard for fineness of surface...'.¹⁸

Jefferson does not make use of the word 'rhythm', but his general remark has much in common with the problem under consideration. It appears that a peculiar rhythmical movement from one part of the novel to another, from a lesser regularity to a greater and vice versa, as well as the 'rhythm of associations', which cause the development of a specific plot, represent the most important factor, that turns 'a cock and a bull story' into the artistic entity of the novel.

University of Odessa

MARK G. SOKOLYANSKY

¹⁶ N. Frye's expression (*op. cit.* p. 270).

¹⁷ Viktor Shklovskij, 'Tristram Shandy' *Sterna i teorija romana* (Petrograd, 1921).

¹⁸ D. Jefferson, *Laurence Sterne* (London, 1954), p. 31.