(Un)Bridled (Dis) Order: Tristram Shandy and the Dynamics of Genres

The moment a work of fiction refuses deliberately to represent the world, to be a transparent window on the world or to express the inner self of men i.e., mirroring the working of the mind, the literary elite dub it as a work that subverting conventions represents an esoteric world that has no semblance with reality. Such a work is immediately branded a failure, quickly labeled experimental and declared irrelevant, useless, lackadaisical, unreadable and, of course, unmarketable.

The fame of Lawrence Stern’s litmus and seminal work, Tristram Shandy too, was jeopardized by the author’s contemporaries and critics when its first two volumes came out in 1759 on account of its explicit focus on its own production, the problems of representing reality through language, subversion of social reality and its involvement in philosophical speculations. The work jettisoned and shoved off hitherto held beliefs and traditions about fiction. The critics and readers, as a result, found Stern’s fiction a hard nut to crack, where, “everything is known in doing and not in the thing seen as done” (Donoghue 46).

Literary critics ticket texts like Tristram Shandy as examples of ‘anti-novel’ which they argue emerged as a protest against the conventions of traditional novel forms. The label anti-novel, however, is too broad a term because it includes all works that appear unconventional and experimental. In 1970, William Gass in his Philosophy and Forms of Fiction argued that a new term was needed to designate such experimental texts that openly break away from the tradition of literary realism. Terms like ‘anti-novel or anti fiction fail to characterize their radical narrative innovations and experiments. Writers like, john Barth, Donald Barthelme, Raynold Federman and Ronald Sukernick in the 20th century not only violate, taunt and subvert the dominant conventions of novel writing but also explicitly discuss the act of experimentation while they perform the very act of writing as Lawrence Sterne did in the 18th century. Gass argues:

There are meta theorems in mathematics and logic; ethics has its linguistics over the soul, everywhere lingoes to converse about lingoes are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don’t mean merely those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those, like some of the works of Borges, Barth, and Flann O’Brien, for example, in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are metafictions” (Shklowsky35).

Metafiction is a fiction about fiction, i.e., a fiction which self consciously reflects upon its own nature, its modes of production, and its intended effects on the reader. The defining characteristic of metafiction is “its direct and immediate concern with fiction making itself. Anti novels may also deal with making fiction but in an indirect way. In metafiction this has become the main subject” (Shklowsky30). The new genre ‘metafiction’ gained wide currency and vogue in the 1950s, while a smorgasbord of terms such as ‘self-reflexive fiction’ (Robert Scholes), ‘Self conscious fiction’ (Robert Alter), ‘Sur fiction’ (Raymond Fedman), ‘Introverted fiction’ (John Fletcher), ‘Narcissistic fiction’ (Linda Hutcheon and ‘Para fiction’ (James Rother) also vied for acceptance among critics in the same age. These writers employed the new nomenclature rather indiscriminately to describe the new narrative genres that flourished in the 20th century, to designate the self-reflexive mentality which corresponded to the Post Modern crisis of representation, and
also to systematize the particular set of self-reflexive literary devices found in the texts of the 18th c writer, Lawrence stern as well. The exponents of this new genre found in the novel no other field left to explore and therefore, they turned to the very act of writing. However, there is a distinction between a metafiction like *Tristram Shandy* and the 20th c. meta-narratives. Whereas narrative introversion characterizes modern texts, the mode of ‘self-conscious narration’ permeates Sterne’s novel. *Tristram Shandy* draws attention to the autonomy of the narrator but the modern counterparts zero in on the autonomy of the fictive structure itself.

All fictions are more or less a commentary on the text itself, about the process of being and maintaining existence. In self consciously displaying the fictional nature of all representations of reality, metafictions point out that our knowledge of the world is ever mediated through language. Since the relation between language and art is already problematic, mimesis in art too has become knotty. Therefore, metafiction, by explicitly commenting on the process of fiction-making, displays the arbitrariness of language that fails as a medium of communication since meanings are always slippery. Derrida calls it ‘the indeterminacy of language’. Patricia Waugh describes metafiction as “fictional writing which self consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”(2). The Greek motto on the title page of *Tristram Shandy*, “It is not things themselves that disturb men, but their judgments about these things”(TS 1) indicates Sterne’s awareness that the source of men’s disagreement may very often be ascribed to the fact that an object gives rise to various and conflicting meanings. The same word may denote diverse things to different persons. Thus for e.g., while the word ‘bridge’ is associated with the bridge of a nose’ to Dr. Slop, it denotes the ‘footbridges made by army during the war’ to Uncle Toby in *Tristram Shandy*. Metafiction, thus, insists on the impossibility of accessing objective reality through language. Fiction constitutes a way of looking at the world and realistic fiction presupposes chronological time as the medium of a plotted narrative, an irreducible individual psyche as the subject of its characterization and above all, the ultimate concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description. But, for a meta-fictionist, all these are problematic and challenging. He is forced to start from the scratches. Reality, time and personality do not exist for him, While the conventional novels begin either in ‘media res’ or ‘in the beginning, the life of Tristram Shandy begins ‘Ab Avo’ defying all conventions. Such a technique supplies the writer freedom from all customs. Instead of lamenting over the loss of any certainty, the meta-fictionists turn it into their advantage by holding it as a means of liberating themselves from the onus of all traditions. They employ it as a means to transcend the limitations imposed upon imagination by narrow categories of coherence and possibility. They, thus, get actually in touch with the life they represent of which they themselves are a part.

Metafiction by explicitly focusing on the process of narration, writing, and composition unveil the techniques of its own narration. It entails an exploration of its theory of fiction through fiction by “scrutinizing all facets of the literary construct – language -, the conventions of plot and character, the relation of the artist to his art and his reader” (Inger 10). Metafiction, by systematically flouting its conditions of artifice and thereby probing into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality, celebrates the release of human creativity in the face of a culture where all forms of representations are reduced to the status of mere simulacra. Meta-fictionists, holding that “novel is very much like inscriptions on the frontispiece of the imaginary castle they invent on the spot”; consider the playful relationship established between the author and text a private act (Fredman 20). It makes itself public by allowing the reader into the text to witness the interplay between the author and his creation thereby functioning as a mirror inside the text. By employing literary tools like parody, irony, digression and playfulness, they demystify the illusory aspects of the story and achieve their intended end. The self-conscious narrators disrupt the storytelling process as well as the reader’s involvement in a world of narrative illusion by moving back and forth between the fictive world of their stories and the world of their
storytelling itself. They destroy the illusion of life-likeness by permanently challenging and breaking down the common borderline between the fictive world and the world of storytelling. Like the narrator, Tristram in *Tristram Shandy*, self-conscious narrators often digress from the main plot and keep reflecting upon the problems they encounter in unfolding and controlling their narrative. They involve the reader in their difficulties of world-making and how they are trapped in their attempts at constructing fictions that imitate the unfathomable complexity of reality. Metafiction, however, does not concern itself with its ability per se to imitate reality but focuses on the differences between art and reality and the writer, accepting this truth discloses instead of hiding, the disparity between fiction and the external world.

In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne created the most elaborate meta-fictional text much before the rise of post-modern metafictions. Sterne wrote *Tristram Shandy* with only Richardson, Fielding Defoe, and Smollett, ‘the four wheels of the novel’, as his major predecessors and contemporaries. The novel was novel enough; the technique unusual enough to allow endless fascination and criticism. The 18th C critics fiercely assaulted and categorized the work as pointless, nonsensical and lacking in everything a novel ought to have. The modern critical taste hails *Tristram Shandy* as “the most typical text of world literature” (Alter 34), applauds its learned wit that relentlessly exhibits the distinction between art and reality by contravening all mores of mimetic representations and by eliciting readers’ attention to the incompetence of the narrator in controlling his narrative. Sterne “took pleasure in destroying the normal order of things and in creating a fictional world that parallels realities of experience” (Spector 50). Tristram, the narrator realizes that following any literary convention is only a schematization and thus a misrepresentation of reality. Sterne’s commitment to reality has reduced the literary feast to a mere ‘word salad’, making “the linear reading that tells what happens, the suspense of a gradually but clearly unfolding plot, the satisfaction of tension and resolution, of symmetry and closure to be useless”(Harris 112).

Though written in the tradition of fictional autobiography, the novel paradoxically concentrates more on events that occurred much before the conception and birth of the narrator than on his life and opinions which the novel’s title declares as its prime concern. As a result, the first book ends 23 years before Tristram’s birth and the last five years before”. Thus, “the end often seems like a beginning and the beginning often marks the end” (Iser 9). Tristram begins his narration ‘ab avo defying the Homeric tradition which insists on beginning either at the beginning or in media res. Tristram carries this to the ludicrous extreme of beginning before the beginning - from the egg. It is because the narrator does not consider his birth the beginning but the end: “My Tristram’s misfortunes” remarks uncle Toby “began nine months before ever he came into the world” (TS 11). The beginning then, is already a result, for the birth was preceded by the conception. Tristram, thus, exposes the artificiality of conventional beginnings of novels which under the pretext of being a start are, in fact, no more than postulates laid down to ratify the end.

Sterne’s novel does not tell a story of life. It “foregrounds the difficulties of narration, the world involved in, making sense out of the world, in finding a pattern in one’s experience and using that pattern as a guide for future behavior” (Ray 272). *Tristram Shandy* focuses on its production and it does so in abstract terms. The novel is not an attempt to represent in realistic terms the social reality of its time as Defoe, Richardson or Fielding had done; but rather philosophical speculations on the problems of representation itself and particularly representation in language. As a writer the problems Tristram faces are very much like Sterne’s. Tristram who has determined to pen down his life and opinions is faced with the problem of writing it most truthfully without ever falsifying his experience. The moment Tristram settles down to write, he encounters two basic and irresolvable contradictions. First, autobiography implies a linear narrative but his awareness of his experience is not linear; second, Tristram recognizes that the medium he must use inevitably falsifies his experience. He, therefore, adopts a narrative that is not merely progressive but one
which is both progressive and digressive. The narration, thus, meanders, shuttling aimlessly from digression to digression, from comments on the inscrutability of the world and the unsympathetic nature of our systems of knowledge to reflections on the impossibility of transcending the intricate interrelatedness of the diverse aspects of reality. The “zigzag movement of narration” remarks Robert Alter “is an authentic rendering of mind’s own resistance to the neatness of pattern and schematization, and at the same time, it is a continuous declaration by the author of the artful arbitrariness of all authorial decisions” (31). Tristram keeps reminding his readers about his inability to supply them with a totalizing view of reality by inserting for instance, empty or marble pages labeled as chapters (Vol. 9:28, 29), pages full of asterisks (Vol.7:20), blank pages (Vol.1: 12), etc. The missing chapters and asterisks, of course, heighten comic suspense while reminding the readers how arbitrary all narrative selections and divisions are. “One way of reminding the readers of his presence,” remarks Ian Watt, “is for Tristram to break down the cold impersonality of print whose impassive objectivity encourages in most novels to forget the literary mirror in which the fictional world is reflected. The typographical tricks, the short or black or marbled pages, though they may not always amuse us, at least serve to remind us that the image reflected in the mirror is less real than the mirror itself, that the mirror, not the reflections in it has the priority of status” (50). It suggests Sterne’s belief that communication takes place more truly through gestures and sympathetic identification than through words.

Stern offers his readers a narrative self – reflexivity in an excessive form by constantly moving back and forth between the fictive world and the world of storytelling itself. In his narrative frenzy, Tristram moves away farther and farther from his announced agenda. He moves farther away from the account of his own identity through narratives that have no direct impact upon the story. The narrator exists only inside the covers of the book and on an equal footing that have no direct impact upon the story. The narrator’s existence must come to an end as well. However, Tristram has no option except to go on writing as long as he lives. As a result, “never a new perspective, no new ground is reached from which to look back on the conflicting past” (Ray 273). The narrator jumps from thought to thought like any other human, instead of remaining on the same story with no digression. Through digression which Tristram considers “the sunshine… the life, the soul of reading” (TS 52), the narrator leads his readers in a wild chase through philosophical speculations, burlesquing other genres, typographical innovations, nonsense chapters, interpolated stories, etc., to convince the readers that our mind always works in an associational method, what John Locke calls ‘the association of ideas’, and not in a linear fashion. Stern employs this medium to achieve a reality that is closer to the human experience. The events in Tristram Shandy extend to an ongoing process of association that prolong itself endlessly. Tristram is acutely aware of the dilemma, he encounters. So after a year of writing, he is almost in the middle of the fourth volume but he has not progressed, he laments, “no farther than to my first day’s life…the more I write, the more I shall have to write: and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read” (TS2078). A few of the digressions, certainly have no direct link to the story of his life because the epigraph to the novel from Epictetus declares “not doing but expressing oneself is the texture of life in this world” and therefore, narration for narration is an end in itself, a narration for narration’s sake, a display of pure production that “turn our consciousness not to the end of the argument but to the process of writing” (Ray 273).

Digressions in Tristram Shandy mirror the way we might relay a story of our lives to an audience. As things surface in our memory, we are under duress to explain them going off on a tangent, not necessarily crucial to the plot. All the tiny digressions are woven into the story to make it a complete one. Sterne’s associational method “moves from oddity to expectancy. Repetition allows the readers to recognize that these elements of the structure represent a way of expressing epistemology, a manner of evaluating the significance of events and a means of achieving a reality closer to human experience than achieved by more
conventional treatments of causality” (Spector 53). The way Tristram Shandy is told is truer to reality than the traditional story because reality tends to be much fragmented with constant digressions and mental links into the past and future. Everyday occurrences and conversations transport us to other times and places, real or imaginary. Through digressions Tristram wants us to understand the way his mind works while writing it as a writer writing an autobiography of his mind. The response we develop to the text then is “ultimately on the cognitive level, an awareness of how Tristram, the supposed author, brings us in and out the text” (Konigsberg 59). Tristram wants us to understand that traditional works that lack digression do not present the appearance of being a spur of the moment. Tristram Shandy’s manipulation of pretexts makes its fictional side more realistic because one can picture Tristram writing the book and making himself real to the readers.

Sterne turns the conventional novel upside down and inside out through his conception of reality. Traditional narratives conceive reality as an order that has the power to condition all human experience, grant the individual identify and provide a context for one’s endeavours. Tristram Shandy burlesques and satirizes the concept of history as order and progression through Walter Shandy, Tristram’s father, and Toby, his uncle, who reduce reality to objective facts and systematized laws. Unsteady in the use of words, Toby seeks the help of maps, military fortifications, etc to save him from a world of explanations. He can arrive at a truthful representation of reality only through facts. Walter, on the other hand, has immense faith in words which he illustrates when his son was misnamed Tristram instead of Trismegistus: “His opinion in the matter was that there was a strange kind of magical bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impressed upon our character and conduct” (TS36). Toby, whose reasoning is always practical and down to earth, admits “for my own part, Trim… I can see no difference between my nephew being called Tristram or Trismegistus” (TS 213). Tristram subverts the concept of history as order by undercutting and disrupting the order of his narrative with digressions. By the digressive and non-progressive flow of the narration, he counters the structural progressive notion of history. Though, the book promises to supply the reader the life and opinions of Tristram Shandy when the story ends we have a little life and no opinion of the protagonist. The hero is abandoned at the age of five and then on the narration goes meandering on diverse tracts, subordinating the main plot to various incidents which have a little or no direct bearing upon the main event. Whereas the traditional novels purport to portray the life and adventures of their heroes, here in Tristram Shandy, ideas take the place of episodes, verbal escapades take the place of action and two elderly talkative men, Walter and Toby, appear in the place of conventional dashing heroes. Tristram circumvents a linear narrative and a beginning, the hall marks of conventional narratives. Reading the book, therefore, is a herculean task for everything here appears upside down, mystifying and bewildering his readers. Tristram begins his story from his conception lampooning traditional narratives where the hero’s birth is taken for granted. But Tristram takes nothing for granted and therefore provides the exact time and date of his conception: “I was begotten in the night, betwixt the first Sunday and the first Monday in the month of March, in the year of Our Lord One Thousand Seven Hundred and Eighteen” (TS 4). However, the hero is not born until a third of the way through the novel. He is born only in chapter 23 of volume III. Between begetting and conception much does happen but it does not offer the kind of material a historian or a novelist can normally handle. Any modern novel that deals with such an early phase in the life of its personae would be like a scientific fantasy. But it provides Tristram the opportunity to enquire into the most important period in a person’s life. Tristram Shandy in this sense is a fantasy though not a scientific one. The life of Tristram breaks off before the hero is mature enough to supply his opinions or to be a significant character in history. The story is half over when the hero reaches five and henceforth he virtually ceases to be the subject of the discourse. Of his history, we know only what the influence of his prenatal period and early infancy had on his life.
Tristram’s celebrated move is to make the disfiguration of extant literary conventions, the very foundation of his identity. He muddles the chronological sequence of his episodes, misnumbers and omits chapters, and reinserts them later. Defying rules, he sandwiches the preface between chapters 20 and 21 of Vol. III and justifies it with the sly comment “All my heroes are off my hands, it’s the first time I have had a moment to spare and I’ll make use of it and write my preface (TS141). Blank pages are deliberately inserted between chapters as if they form chapters (Vol.IX: 18 719). Tristram explains that this is meant simply as an example of his privilege as a narrator to write as he pleases: “All I wish is that it may be a lesson to the world, to let people tell their stories in their way” (TS 446). He omits chapter 24 in volume IV and skips from chapter 23 to 25 and defends it by arguing that the writer has such a license. His procedure is to “do all things out of rule” (TS 203). Most chapters end in a delirium of asterisks. He embellishes his narration with typographical innovations, blank pages (TS 331), and marbled pages (TS 163). Many of Sterne’s other typographical usages like dashes, diagrams, graphs, italics etc., “call us back from the show to the showman” For “the capitals and gothic letters supply heavier emphasis for a moral reflection, scholarly reference or a tear. Asterisks and blank spaces similarly provoke our active response and lead us to what they stand for or to supply something for ourselves” (Watt 50). Again, the hero appears in scenes when he was not yet been born. Dead men appear alive again. Thus, Parson Yorick whose death was announced in Vol I: 12, “Atlas! Parson Yorick is dead (TS 22), reappears for the hero’s baptism in Volume IV. There is chaos and inspired disorder everywhere in the novel making E.M. Forster comment: “Obviously a God is hidden in Tristram Shandy. His name is Muddle” (111-112).

The sporadic flickers of narrations are, in fact, an intentional mockery of chronological plot continuity. Sterne engages himself in deliberate demolition of plot, character and action. In Tristram Shandy, there are no straight men or norms. Its world is entirely peopled with Smolletti an eccentrics. It is not an attempt to represent in realistic terms the social reality of its time, but rather, a series of philosophical speculations on the problems of representation itself. Most of these formal innovations can be found in some of his predecessors. But Tristram Shandy’s uniqueness is that it makes them the explicit subject of its narrative. Tristram Shandy rejects the indenture to verisimilitude and grounds both the identity and authority of its protagonist entirely with the process of narration, thereby establishing a private ‘Shandyian’ convention to fight conventions.

Works Cited
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