

## Commentary article

# The humorous body: a Bergsonian reading of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

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### Abstract

*This paper is a commentary upon the mingling of the affective and discursive varieties of humour in the eighteenth century based on the observation that the body and bodily processes are at the core of humour in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. The author notes in this novel a curious coming together of the various conceptions of the functioning of the human body prevalent at that time and linguistic slippages. Linguistic quips aid in a slippery transition between the various conceptions of the body and discursive linguistic aspects, thus creating humour. Linguistic slips of this kind seem to be inspired by John Locke's philosophy popular at the time, while an analysis using Henri Bergson's essay on the comic is carried out to look at the mechanism in which humour is produced through the body in the novel as the iatromechanistic and humoral models of the body lend themselves to be seen as comic in the Bergsonian sense.*

*Keywords: eighteenth century, humour, bodily humour, satiric fiction, Sterne.*

## 1. Introduction

Humour can be entertaining and enlightening, demeaning and constructive, but perhaps most significantly, it can be satirical and subversive. Especially in this subversive mode, like in political cartoons and satirical fiction, humour often attempts to achieve its desired result by degrading the individual(s) and institutions it critiques by pointing out their excesses and eccentricities (Bakhtin, 1984; Hodgart, 2017 [1969]). Such degradation very often centres on the bodily, as is evident from abuses and curses in the linguistic register and caricatures in the visual register (Hodgart, 2017 [1969]). Laughter, often convulsive, which is the physiological

reaction to finding something humorous, re-iterates this centrality of the body as the site around which humour is experienced (Morreall, 2020 [2012]).

Affect theory today acknowledges this primacy of the materiality of the body in humour research, as the body is not only the content or object of what is humorous but also the site at which humour is felt and experienced (Tierney-Hynes, 2020): the internal organs are jostled when we laugh and medical science tells us about chemicals produced in the body that lead to various states of the mind including feeling ‘tickled’. However, this article observes this to be a reverse change from the eighteenth century when the meaning of the word *humour* underwent a transformation from merely the medicalised understanding of the fluids of the body (as in the ancient theory of humours) to metaphorically referring to a situation involving someone being strange or out of sorts or out of their humour taking after Jonson’s play “Every Man out of His Humour” (McCabe, 1989; Tierney-Hynes, 2020), which would often tickle the mind of the observer.

In this changing definition of humour in the eighteenth century, this article locates the original paradigmatic shift from the affective understanding of humour to a discursive one. This paper sets out to investigate a possible connection between these two domains in the eighteenth century through a detailed analysis of Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Humour, in its modern sense, seems to be originating from both the affective and the discursive in Tristram Shandy: language through its use of puns, metaphors and other quips on the one hand, and the body with its excesses of ‘humours’, on the other. In fact, a deep connection between the linguistic and bodily experiences of humour becomes evident through the observation of how words seem to have an impact on the material body in Sterne’s text. Henri Bergson’s book-length analysis of the comic in *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1913 [1911]) will provide the theoretical framework for this analysis. This will reveal not only the coexistence of but also this possible connection between the discursive analysis of humour centred on the enlightenment curiosity about the functioning of the body and the affective understanding of humour (funny) that involves understanding the bodily excesses and their purgation through the older medicalised understanding of humours as bodily fluids. John Locke’s assertions about language and the association of ideas in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) lend another theoretical pillar to this analysis as a close relationship between language and the body is seen.

Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759) begins with a ‘humorous’, yet deeply philosophical dive into the process of bringing a human being into the world, as the narrator Tristram wonders with palpable disappointment about the moment of his own conception. As he wishes that his parents had “duly consider’d how much depended upon what they were then doing; — that not only the production of a rational Being was concern’d in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body” (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 3) and perhaps his entire fortune depended on the “humours and dispositions which were then uppermost” (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 3), the narrator reminds the reader of the theory of humours and the Enlightenment curiosity about the working of the human body. As we consider the possibility that the narrator may be engaging seriously with this humoral model of understanding the body, he orchestrates a slippage into a parodic discussion of the “animal spirits” emphasising on how much in a human depends on “their motions and activity, and the different tracks and trains you put them into” as “away they go cluttering like hey-go-mad; and ...make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk” (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 3). As the readers amuse themselves with this literal take on the iatromechanistic conception of the human body also prevalent at the time, the readers instantly know that they are being set up for a specific flavour of humour that originates from the various conceptions of the body in the eighteenth century and is precipitated through the slippages in language. This productive and

careful intermingling of the various conceptions of the body and their slippery linkages with language makes this text a suitable choice for the purpose of this paper.

## **2. Connection between language and the body**

### **2.1. Characters and their bodies in *Tristram Shandy***

What is very noticeable at the outset is the connection clearly expressed between the body and language in the novel. Sterne's characters do not use language only to represent their bodies, bodily processes and injuries but rather also invest faith in the power that language maintains over the body: to hurt as well as to heal. Walter's hypothesis on Christian names "on which he thought a great deal more depended than what superficial minds were capable of conceiving" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 38) is a case in point. He believed "[t]hat there was a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impress'd upon our characters and conduct" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: 38). His belief that "was your son called Judas—the sordid and treacherous idea, so inseparable from the name, would have accompanied him thro' life like his shadow" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 40) shows his unflinching faith in the power of words to shape the character of the person.

However, it is in his attempted naming of his own child that his belief in the power of words to affect the body becomes apparent. As his son is born with a crushed nose thanks to Dr. Slop's new-age obstetrical instruments, Walter believes that "the greatest evil has befallen him" and that he must "counteract and undo it with the greatest good" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 209) by naming him Trismegistus. Trismegistus, the name of the "greatest king – the greatest law-giver – the greatest philosopher – and the greatest priest – and engineer" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 213) is expected to bring good fortune on the boy whose crushed nose has set him back. If this may give the impression that the name will only have an impact on the conduct and character of the person and not on the body, we must consider the close connection between the body and the character hinted at here. The belief expressed is that a person with a crushed nose could not have become the greatest king and the greatest law-giver and all the rest, and that the name Trismegistus will compensate for the shortcomings of the body to allow the child to achieve the greatness he is capable of. Words in the form of names then are playing a compensatory role – much like the artificial bridge of the nose that Dr. Slop tried to build for Tristram out of Susannah's stays.

Healing through words seems to also be the most plausible explanation for Toby's incessant attempts to narrate his version of the Battle of Namur where he sustained his groin injury. In a very telling example of the healing power of words, we see Uncle Toby's wound starts to heal only after he starts to narrate it to every visitor in his brother Walter's house. The fact that no friend or acquaintance left from Walter's house without being led to sit and listen to Toby's tale by his bedside was seen by the narrator as a "much more sincere mark of his (Walter's) affection" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 59) than him inviting Toby to live with him and be taken care of. The narrator also categorically informs us that for Uncle Toby who had hitherto been "four years totally confined" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 59) to his bedroom, "[t]hese conversations were infinitely kind; and my uncle Toby received great relief from them" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 59) to the extent that "uncle Toby's wound was near well" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 71) so soon that the surgeon could pronounce these words only after he "recovered his surprize" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 71). In fact, all of Toby's difficulties would arise only because of "the insurmountable difficulties he found in telling his story intelligibly" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 63). In these moments of failure of narration, the narration would make the wound come alive

as a result of being reminded of the pain he has been in. At any rate, the power of the words over the body remains undoubted.

## **2.2. The language-body link in the context of the 18<sup>th</sup> century**

This belief in the power of words to heal is not out of sync with the prevalent beliefs about the body and healing of the time. Ben Jonson resurrected the theory of humours from the ancients and made it relevant to an understanding of characters and bodies in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries through his play “Every Man out of His Humour” (McCabe, 1989). This ancient belief was that the proportion of the four fluids (blood, phlegm, bile, black bile) is what governs the body, character and disposition of a person. However, as Rebecca Tierney-Hynes (2020, p. 178) points out, Jonson was not advocating a straightforward medicalised understanding of humours as he argues. In the words of Tierney-Hynes (2020, p. 178), humour can be “used appropriately in its transferred meaning (‘by metaphor’) to describe an imbalanced temperament”. Thus the meaning of the word *humour* had already begun changing with Jonson’s intervention.

This belief and its revision mingled, in eighteenth century literature, with John Locke’s theory about knowledge creation in his work “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” (1689), where Locke makes two significant propositions. First, taking an anti-nativist position, Locke argues that no ideas or knowledge are innately present in the human mind and that everything is ultimately gained through experience. While predispositions, capacities and inclinations are the only things inherently present in the mind, it is experience (internal or external) that triggers those capacities in certain directions, leading to the creation of knowledge. Second, Locke points out that ideas have the ability to get associated with each other with no deliberate intervention of the mind such that one idea always brings the other to mind. It is possibly out of this combination of the humoral model of the body with Locke’s assertions that the popular conception of the body and healing in the eighteenth century takes shape. Words could trigger ideas which could be associated with other ideas which could in turn trigger certain fluids of the body to become more or less active which would have an impact on the person’s body, healing abilities and disposition.

This is seemingly also the basis for the method of medical treatment in the eighteenth century, as described by Severine Pilloud and Micheline Louis-Courvoisier (2003), who observe that in the eighteenth century, doctors seldom asked to physically examine the patient. They rather depended on the descriptive narratives of patients about their symptoms and how they felt about the disease. Patients would often describe in great detail their bodily secretions, which included the four fluids and also their saliva, sweat and mucous, and even their emotional predispositions at the time when they experienced symptoms. It is interesting to note that for this reason, the epistolary form was a very common and acceptable mode of communication between the doctor and the patient. This emphasis on the narrative of the disease leads Pilloud and Louis-Courvoisier to conjecture that the descriptive narratives (oral or written) had some power to alleviate the conditions. The significance of creating a narrative of the bodily processes and disorders also leads Pilloud and Louis-Courvoisier to consider the importance of the connection between the interior of the body to the exterior. Laying emphasis on “the partial opening of the body to the exterior” (Pilloud and Louis-Courvoisier, 2003: 467), they look at narratives of patients in the eighteenth century to determine how “the closure of the body entailed a real danger of disease” and was “perceived as such by numerous patients” (Pilloud and Louis-Courvoisier, 2003: 467). This maintenance of the link between orifices of the body with the outside is both a physical as well as a moral requirement for the preservation of the individual. Just like it is important for the body to eliminate waste like stools generated within the body and absorb clean air, food and water from the outside into the body, it is equally

important for the individual to be intellectually and morally open and receptive to his/her surroundings.

### **2.3. The iatromechanistic body in *Tristram Shandy***

This is the context against which we shall read the curse to excommunicate Obadiah from the Catholic Church in *Tristram Shandy*. For tying the knots of Dr. Slop's pouch so tight that Dr. Slop suffered an injury in trying to undo the knots, Obadiah is excommunicated from the Catholic Church by being cursed in all the natural processes of his body: "May he be cursed in eating and drinking, in being hungry, in being thirsty, in fasting, in sleeping, in slumbering, in walking, in standing, in sitting, in lying, in working, in resting, in pissing, in shitting, and in blood-letting" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 131). It is evident that through cursing these processes, especially when eating, drinking, pissing and shitting are concerned, what is being affected and cursed is the contact between the body and its outside. A belief in the iatromechanistic model of the body becomes apparent as Obadiah is cursed in every part of his body by name: "in his temples, in his forehead, in his ears, in his eyebrows, in his cheeks, in his jaw-bones, in his nostrils, in his foreteeth and grinders, in his lips, in his throat, in his shoulders, in his wrists, in his arms, in his hands, in his fingers... and in his groin" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 131). The conception of the body functioning as a machine is further strengthened as Obadiah is also cursed in "all the joints and the articulations of his members, from the top of his head and the soles of his feet" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 133). Thus the picture of the body that emerges from this episode is that of a machine with many parts and joints functioning smoothly through a coordination between the different parts.

However, unlike a machine perhaps, the human body also needs to maintain a two-way relationship with the surroundings such that fresh materials (e.g. air, water, food) can be taken in and the waste (e.g. impure air, urine, faeces) be discarded. If the cursing is successful (and there is immense faith expressed in the power of words to impact the body), it would produce a body in which the different parts cannot work smoothly together (unlike a well-oiled machine) and the processes of ingesting fresh material and eliminating waste are affected negatively, making the body lose the porosity which is essential for its survival. Once the human body loses this porosity so essential to its survival, it is not much different from a machine without life.

## **3. Bergson and the comic**

Henri Bergson (1913 [1911]) would find this image of the body to be laughable. Bergson locates the cause of laughter in what he calls "mechanical inelasticity" (1913 [1911]: 20) in something we assume to be living and dynamic in his work *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1913 [1911]). This inelasticity could be described as a resistance or inability to alter and adjust in accordance with changing circumstances and thus could manifest itself variously: as absent-mindedness in character; repetition in situations and words; and exaggeration in forms like deformities, disguises, gestures and caricatures.

### **3.1. Bergson's philosophical premise**

To understand the full import of Bergson's assertion in this book-length essay we must quickly review the proposition(s) in his major work *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1912) which will place us in the heart of Bergson's core philosophy. For Bergson, several concepts such as human selves, consciousness, memory and duration of time among others, are infused with a certain dynamic vitality that takes these concepts beyond the realm of matter into the metaphysical realm of immateriality. These 'objects' of understanding, as he calls them, have an element of

life and dynamism in them and this dynamism eludes comprehension if observed only in parts. He then points out the fundamental disjunction as he sees it between this dynamic object of analysis and the nature of analysis typically used in the sciences that understands objects only from the outside and only in parts. This conventionally scientific analysis may be fit, according to Bergson, for objects that are static and unchanging, but is unsuitable for analysing objects characterised by a dynamic vitality. Therefore, the vitality and dynamism that Bergson focuses upon is that of a human self, suggesting that our imagination's "clear-cut philosophy" (Bergson, 1913 [1911]: p. 28) is that every human form has a soul which imparts lightness, immateriality and gracefulness to the body. Thus, for Bergson, when a human being or a group of human beings or a human situation turns out in such a way that s/he/it can be understood and predicted like a machine, the result flouts our expectations and leads to laughter.

Such is the case with the excommunication curse described above that presents an image of Obadiah's body as an accumulation of some body parts rather than a dynamic whole and the curses being successful, this accumulation would be devoid of the life-force that maintains the internal systems that distinguish the human body from a machine. Thus, by using the iatromechanistic model of the human body and moulding the excommunication curse the way ex-clergyman Sterne does in this scene, he renders the situation laughable. Mulder (2022) notices the beginnings of similar skeins of thought as early as 1610 in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*:

The anatomical passages of the play are as often stopped up as they are functioning, however, and a study of the play's orificial passages, blockages, interruptions, and refusals sheds new light on the disorganising liveliness of Jonson's comic characters... The play's recycling and recirculation of waste, on the one hand, and comic language, on the other, stop up the proper functioning of the social body.

(Mulder, 2022: p. 67)

While a similar process is at work even in the mid eighteenth century when *Tristram Shandy* is written, as will become evident it is characterised by language that is much bawdier and ideas that more strongly challenge the superficial decorum of the society.

### 3.2. Bergson's comic situations and *Tristram Shandy*

Bergson illustrates his assertion that "Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement" (Bergson, 1913 [1911]: p. 40) through three real-life situations which are also seen in children's games. These situations shed some light on the humour in *Tristram Shandy*. One of the children's games relevant in this context is 'The Dancing Jack' which is essentially a toy controlled by the child through strings. In real-life situations, when a person appears to be 'played' or manipulated by someone else or when s/he discovers that the choices they thought they made 'freely' were actually being guided by someone not visible, the result according to Bergson is laughter. A corollary of this is what Bergson calls *inversion*, an example being a robber getting robbed: someone who thought s/he was cleverer than the rest and could outsmart the rest gets outsmarted by others. In *Tristram Shandy*, it is the episode with Dr. Slop's injury that can be seen in this context. As Obadiah is sent to bring Dr. Slop's obstetrical instruments from his house to Shandy Hall for Tristram's mother is in labour, Obadiah ties the strings of the bays bag "with half a dozen hard knots" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 123) to make the instruments safe. Dr. Slop, upon receiving the pouch and unable to undo the knots, is forced to use a pen-knife to cut the strings but ends up cutting his thumb "quite across to the very bone" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 126). The doctor, called to prevent injury and heal pain, was comically in need of being attended to himself. While no one deliberately played Slop like a puppet with strings, his anger at Obadiah observed through the excommunication curse tends to indicate that Slop

thought of it as a deliberate act to injure the one that heals everyone. In fact, as he reads out the curses to excommunicate Obadiah from the Catholic Church, another inversion becomes evident. Here was a person belonging to a religious community—one that is known for kindness and forgiveness—cursing every part of the body of a person who had inadvertently hurt him. The preacher of kindness and forgiveness was himself thrown into a bout of cursing and dissing with just a little encouragement from Walter who advocated the reading of the violent curse.

Similarly, while Walter tries to be the master of affairs and tries to plan everything such that everything is under his control, he ultimately fails at almost everything he tries. He tries to peacefully conceive a child but his wife interrupts with a question about winding up the clock; he tries to bring the child safely into the world and organises for Dr. Slop to be present but the doctor ends up ruining the nose of the child with his forceps; he tries to compensate for the nose injury by giving the child a remarkable name, but the name gets abridged to a name Walter does not believe to be good; he tries to direct the upbringing of his child through *Tristrapedia*, the book of instructions on child-raising, but he cannot keep up with the speed of the growth of the child who grows up without those instructions even as Walter writes. Walter's repeated failures despite incessant attempts again give the reader the impression of Walter being played in the hands of someone else who is controlling Walter's life. Someone seems to be watching over all his attempts and floundering them one by one even as Walter thinks he has things under his control. The result is laughter for the reader.

This repetition takes us to another game that Bergson (1913 [1911]) highlights, 'The Jack-in-the-Box', a toy consisting of a box from which pops up a little man without fail despite repeated attempts by the child to push him into the box. The child finds the repetition funny. For Bergson, this corresponds to repetition in real-life situations that we tend to find laughable, coincidences being an example. If one accidentally runs into a person s/he knows well in an unlikely place once, it's a pleasant surprise; the second time in another place is an uncanny surprise; and the third time may send one into splits of laughter. Besides Walter's repeated failures, Sterne's novel has no dearth of repetitions producing a comic effect. Notably, it is this particular characteristic—repetition—that Bergson indicates as the reason for caricatures of people being funny. Exaggeration of a longish nose in a sketch, for instance, makes it appear to be a repetition of the elongation that nature itself had initiated in the body of the person. This is also the context in which we can understand the hobby-horses of the various characters in *Tristram Shandy*. "When a man gives himself up to the government of a ruling passion,----, or in other words, when his HOBBY-HORSE grows head-strong, ----farewell cool reason and fair discretion!" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 71). A hobby-horse, defined here as the ruling passion of a person, is something that a person indulges in excessively. Such exaggerated involvement in a kind of conduct could be seen as a kind of repetition as the characters indulge themselves in those activities on repeat.

Walter Shandy indulges in theorising about every issue that comes his way in life. Walter maintained several hypotheses: on Christian names having an impact on character; on the importance of preserving the baby's head as it is pushed out of the mother's womb by force; and about the importance of having good noses. Every crisis situation in his personal life (often connected with his son Tristram) throws Walter into a rabbit-hole of researching and hypothesising instead of dealing with the situation head-on, which the reader usually finds funny, or frustrating. Tristram's hobby-horse is to constantly deviate from his own plans and never keep up with his promises to the reader, much unlike or perhaps like the narrator of a typical realist novel of the time. He promises to write a chapter on sleep, on chance, on button-holes and chambermaids but he does not get to them when he promises he would and rather cockily takes pride in it: "I set no small store by myself on this very account, that my reader has never yet been able to guess at any thing" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 59).

Yet, it is the character Toby, however, who takes the centre-stage in this analysis. He comes across as the most machine-like and cut off from his surroundings as he is often lost in his own world whistling an army tune Lillabullero. He responds to the surroundings almost exclusively when he can mistake a word or sentence spoken by someone to make references to the battle he fought when he got his groin injury. Exceptions to this are only emergency situations requiring everyone's attention. In response to Walter's wonder about how, despite the risks involved in childbirth the world is so populated, Toby wishes "you had seen what prodigious armies we had in Flanders" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 109). Similarly, as Walter narrated the tale of Slawkenbergius and wondered how truth would "shut herself up in such impregnable fastnesses, and be so obstinate as not to surrender herself sometimes up upon the closest siege", the word "siege" worked "like a talismanic power" (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 178) to catch Toby's fancy and had it not been for Walter's intervention, would have launched Toby into another tedious narration of the battle.

Slippages like these that the novel abundantly exploits arise either from the ambiguities inherent in language itself (words with multiple meanings, metaphors, puns) or alternatively, may be imagined as arising out of the Lockean thesis of the association of ideas. The expression of one idea may lead to an entirely different idea associated in the mind of another. These slippages produce a comic effect by allowing two people using the same words to refer to two very different situations and/or things and take us to the third situation that Bergson analyses in his book. Bergson describes a common situation known as 'the snowball': "an effect which grows by arithmetical progression, so that the cause, insignificant at the outset, culminates by a necessary evolution in a result as important as it is unexpected" (Bergson, 1913 [1911]: p. 81). Bergson suggests that this lack of proportion between cause and effect hints at a mechanical arrangement behind the series of causes and effects and that leads to laughter. The manifestation of this effect in real-life scenarios is what Bergson calls "reciprocal interference" (1913 [1911]: p. 96) by which he means a situation that refers to (or signifies) two or more different things at the same time, thus leading to unexpected outcomes which are sometimes disproportionate to their origins. When we take literally something that was meant figuratively or use a seemingly unrelated verbal signifier to refer to a certain signified (as in the use of puns), we are either employing or falling prey to reciprocal interference.

This is the aspect of Bergson's theory to which comes closest the theory of (debatably) his staunchest critic Arthur Koestler (1989), who suggests that the one underlying principle in all comic situations is a sudden "bisociation" (Koestler, 1989: p. 20), a term he has coined to mean a "clash of the two mutually incompatible codes or associative contexts" (Koestler, 1989: p. 19). For Koestler, while a code is the fixed, invariable aspect of a skill or the unchanging rule; the matrix is the changeable and varying manifestation of the code. Thus, when a particular matrix reminds us of another matrix, through its underlying code, then a creative process gets underway. The result of that creative process depends on the compatibility of the matrices. If the matrices are compatible and come together in such a way that they produce something new, the result is an innovative scientific discovery and evokes marvel. If the matrices are compatible and come together in such a way that they complement each other in invoking the sympathy of the audience in a novel way, then the result is a poetic image in art. However, if the matrices are incompatible with each other and do not at all complement each other, then the most probable result is laughter. Koestler represents these three possibilities of scientific creation, art and the comic on a triptych suggesting that even the same combination of codes and matrices could produce any one of these three possibilities depending upon how the matrices are related to each other. This is how he resolves in his theory his primary criticism of Bergson's theory on laughter that Bergson cannot explain how reciprocal interference necessarily leads to laughter. However, it seems that Koestler has failed to give due credit to, although he mentions Bergson's concept of transposition as "the interference of two independent series" (Koestler, 1989, p. 66), which



not only comes close to but exceeds the possibilities of the Koestlerian analysis. This becomes the subject of the following section.

### **3.3. Puns, metaphors and the play of words in *Tristram Shandy***

Bergson identifies puns and metaphors as sources of humour but considers them the lesser variety when compared to what he calls the “true play upon words” (Bergson, 1913 [1911]: p. 120) which he defines thus: “one and the same sentence through which two different sets of ideas are expressed, and we are confronted with only one series of words; but advantage is taken of the different meanings a word may have, especially when used figuratively instead of literally” (Bergson, 1913 [1911]: p. 120). This deception, or “lapse of attention” (Bergson, 1913 [1911]: 121) of language, that makes one sign or word lead us to other, often disconnected, meanings prompts Bergson to a discussion of transposition which he considers as having more far-reaching consequences. In Bergson’s view, “a comic effect is always obtainable by transposing the nature expression of an idea into another key” (Bergson, 1913 [1911]: p. 123). While this conception seems to be deceptively similar to Koestler’s (1989) bisociation, Bergson goes further to identify the two most common keys an oscillation between which consistently produces comic effects. When the solemn is transposed into the familiar, a degradation of the solemn takes place and the result is parody. On the other hand, when the familiar is transposed into the solemn, an exaggeration of the small and familiar takes place, and the result is a mock-epic. Seeing such transpositions as being at the root of the comic in words, Bergson suggests that “transposition is to ordinary language what repetition is to comedy” (Bergson, 1913 [1911], 121). In a view reminiscent of Locke’s (1689) association of ideas, Bergson suggests that certain words and/or phrases develop such connotations that, almost in a mechanical way, the use of one set of ideas leads to another and hence produces laughter (Bergson, 1913 [1911], pp. 122-123). In this analysis then, slippage within language (puns and metaphors), a conscious play upon words, repetitive/mechanical action, and transposition come together with the effect either of degradation or exaggeration of the subject at hand (Bergson, 1913 [1911]: pp. 122-123).

Something akin to this specific combination of techniques seems to be at play in *Tristram Shandy* in general and Slawkenbergius’s Tale within it in particular. There are innumerable puns and metaphors used in the novel and many others that Tristram mentions refraining from. He does not write the chapter about “chamber-maids and button-holes... the two subjects, especially so connected together, (that they) might endanger the morals of the world” (Sterne, 2014: pp. 274-275). He also postpones the chapter “Upon whiskers” since “the world will not bear it- ‘tis a delicate world” (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 260). These words owe the sexual undertones they carry to the overall context endowed on them by the novel and the attention that Tristram showers on them through the repetition of those undertones ad nauseam. Amongst the metaphors that are allowed to have a longer life in the novel is the word *nose* that is established as a metaphor for the penis through the conversation between Walter, Toby and Slop. As Walter worries about the precious nose of his child being injured during the birthing process, Toby makes him think how much worse it would have been if the hips of the child came out of the womb first instead of the head. Notably, this conversation follows the narration of Slawkenbergius’s Tale in the same volume in which we see an entire town enchanted with Slawkenbergius’s nose. In descriptions that reek of erotic desire, “the city was like a swarm of bees” (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 189) as they buzzed about Slawkenbergius’s nose and are observed dying to see it and touch it while Slawkenbergius maintains that “it never shall be touched... till that hour” (Sterne, 2014 [1759]: p. 189) which hour the readers gather is his meeting with his beloved Julia. The inhabitants of this city do not simply admire the nose and its symbolisation of the male genital organ; the inhabitants are in a trance with it reminiscent of people experiencing a religious miracle. Yet, the play upon words here ensures that even when

the reader senses erotic desire, the words literally only refer to the nose such that this description of an entire city being enchanted with a person's nose unmistakably has mock-epic resonances. The discursive variety of humour evident in the play upon the word *nose* therefore combines with the affective variety of humour in this episode as we cannot ignore the excess of erotic desire that is made to be the target of laughter.

#### 4. Conclusion

These close linkages between words and the body explored above have led other critics to draw different conclusions. For instance, King (1995, p. 294) argues that “the body in Sterne is not merely a site of comic opportunity but rather a privileged, though vulnerable, location of patriarchal power”. He also notes that “many of the textual acts function as compensation for the loss of impairment of peculiarly sexual abilities linked with the masculine prerogative” (King, 1995: p. 299). The failure of language to heal or compensate here indicates the failure of the masculine body, in King's opinion, thereby re-confirming the location of patriarchal power in the body. The author of this paper, however, reads in these close linkages a merging together of the various conceptions of the functioning of the human body as well as of the functioning of language. Through the play of words the narrative repeatedly oscillates between the humoral and the iatromechanistic conceptions of the body. The constant slippage through transposition between words and body seems to ask for an analysis that is neither wholly discursive nor totally affective but both. This specific flavour of humour characterises, though not uniquely and exclusively, the eighteenth century.

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