

TRISTRAM SHANDY – THE PLAYFUL ART OF SEDUCTION

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Abstract: *The main concern of a skilled storyteller is not to report a sequence of events, but to tell a ‘tellable’ story and to ward off the question ‘so what?’ coming from the listener. However, what happens when the story has little to recommend it as ‘tellable’? This is the case of Tristram Shandy who uses sexuality as elaborate rhetorical strategy to constantly tease and arouse his narratees’ imagination.*

Keywords: *tellability, sexuality, rhetoric, anticipatory constituents*

1. Introduction

In Laurence Sterne’s novel, *Tristram Shandy* uses sexuality as an elaborate rhetorical strategy to constantly tease and arouse his narratees’ imagination. Thus, his narrative becomes a continuous foreplay with the narratees in which language and sexuality become markers of creativity. In the absence of a story proper, sex is the driving force which can justify the *tellability* of the narrative and seduce the narratees into reading or listening to it.

The relationship between narrator and narratee has been approached from various angles in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. It is enough to mention Booth’s (1983:221-240) already classical discussion of this novel in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* or Helen Ostovich’s (2006:171-190) analysis of the relationship between Tristram and his female reader. However, little attention has been paid to the rhetorical strategies used by Tristram in order to charm his narratees. For this reason, I will need to resort to conversational storytelling, a branch of rhetorical narratology, which stresses the interactive part of storytelling and sees it as a matter of negotiation between addresser and addressee. At a first glance, as far as *Tristram Shandy* is concerned, using conversational storytelling may seem inappropriate given the fact that, even though it is not identical to oral storytelling, conversational storytelling is still closely connected to it. However, I consider that Sterne’s novel textually recreates a storytelling event in which the main protagonists are Tristram, the narrator and his diverse narratees. Throughout the novel, Tristram, as he himself confesses, also attempts to turn writing into conversation: “WRITING, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation” (Sterne 1996:75). Apart from conversational storytelling, but still closely connected to it, there is the rhetoric of text which helps me identify what rhetorical devices are used to capture the narratee’s attention and how they are expressed textually.

2. Sexuality – A Clever Way to Justify *Tellability*

Skilful storytellers know how to ‘dress up’ and ‘arrange’ their stories to make them appealing and worth listening to. Therefore, according to conversational storytelling, *tellability* is one major characteristic of all stories, whether written or oral. *Tellability* states that “a story must be ‘reportable’ or ‘tellable’: [a] would-be narrator must be able to defend the story as relevant and newsworthy to get and hold the floor and escape censure at its conclusion” (Norrick 2007:134). Similarly, Labov (1972:366) argues that the main concern of a skilled narrator may not be to report a sequence of events, but to tell a ‘tellable’ story and to ward off the question ‘so what?’ coming from the listener. Culler (2001:206) uses Labov’s theory in his discussion of the narratological distinction between story and discourse. Hence, storytellers or narrators order the events, not necessarily in a temporal sequence, but so as to keep the listeners’ or narratees’ attention alert. They also frequently embed in their stories indirect or direct evaluative comments that are part of the discourse or plot and that establish the worth of their story. *Tellability* is also a very paradoxical characteristic: some stories are not worth telling, holding little significance for the potential listeners, others fall into what Norrick (2007:136) called “the dark side of *tellability*”. In the latter category, Norrick includes so-called “transgressive stories”; namely stories that are too intimate, sexually revealing, deviant, too frightening, or they stray too far from community standards.

Apparently, Tristram’s story is not much of a story; the actual tale never materializes. In other words, it barely reaches the lower-bounding threshold of *tellability*. The two main protagonists are the storyteller and his audience, but we have no story, or only a minimal one that can be summed up in just a few words. Actually, Tristram is more of a performer than a storyteller or a writer, focused more on the how of the story and less on the story as such. He is more concerned with what Jeffrey Williams (1998:24-51) calls the plot of narrating (digressions, regressions, progressions) than with the plot proper. Moreover, the plot of narrating makes Tristram’s discourse performative. His exclusive focus on his persona as a performer becomes clear in the improvisational nature of his relationship with the narratees. He frequently toys with them, going from excessive flattery to mockery. In fact, Tristram’s performance is the equivalent of today’s one man show. He is the eighteenth century variant of the stand-up comedian, “the giddy and flexible entertainer, always dynamically involved with his audience and his material, in danger every moment of losing the sympathy of the one and his control over the other” (Piper 1965:17).

Tristram couples his excessive verbosity and performance with his sexual energy. Hence, his subversive nature is reflected in his way of justifying *tellability* by choosing sex both as a transgressive plot and a rhetorical device. Sexuality as a driving force for Tristram’s narrative is present on three levels –in the plot proper, the dialogue between narrator and narratee, and in the telling of the story. However, sex is never overtly alluded to, only hinted at using innuendoes, allusiveness, or double-entendres. Sex is implicitly present and its various guises are more or less

subtle. As usual, Tristram walks a tightrope: he exploits to the maximum his narratees' need for the lewd without overtly breaking community standards. He is aware that even his most prudish narratees (the respected Sir or the stern Critic) have two ears: one that craves for the bawdy and another that is repelled by it.

In the plot proper, one has, first of all, the opening scene, called by Andrew Wright (1969:212) "*flagrante delicto*". It is the scene in which Tristram turns his narratees into voyeurs looking at his parents as they are actually in the process of conceiving him.

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me. (Sterne 1996:5)

This very scene sets the tone for the whole book. Automatically, these words plunge Tristram's narratees into a world of intimacy. The conversation between narrator and narratee becomes a private, intimate one, opened up to all possibilities.

Another erotic scene appears in Book Eight, Chapter 22, when Trim tells his master, Tristram's uncle Toby, how he fell in love with a young Beguine who nursed the knee-wound he received in battle. At the time he found shelter in the house of two peasants where he encountered the fair nun. In order to alleviate his pain, one afternoon, as the old man and his wife were gone, the Beguine came into his room to rub his knee.

The fair Beguine, said the corporal, continued rubbing with her whole hand under my knee—till I fear'd her zeal would weary her—I would do a thousand times more,' said she, 'for the love of Christ'—In saying which, she pass'd her hand across the flannel, to the part above my knee, which I had equally complain'd of, and rubb'd it also. I perceiv'd, then, I was beginning to be in love—

As she continued rub-rub-rubbing—I felt it spread from under her hand, an' please your honour, to every part of my frame—

The more she rubb'd, and the longer strokes she took—the more the fire kindled in my veins—till at length, by two or three strokes longer than the rest—my passion rose to the highest pitch—I seiz'd her hand—. (Sterne 1996:405)

Most certainly, Tristram's readers are left to believe that 'the rubbing of the knee' is an erotic euphemism, brimming with sexual connotations. The context is highly suggestive, starting with the many pauses that punctuate Trim's story and ending with words such as "zeal", "strokes", "the highest pitch", and, of course, "passion". However, similarly to the majority of Tristram's embedded tales, this erotic anecdote is left suspended, much to the readers' frustrations. Uncle Toby impatiently cuts short Trim's account, which is clearly approaching a sexual climax, by saying "And then thou clapped'st it to thy lips, Trim, said my uncle Toby—and madest a speech" (1996:405).

Another seemingly innocent story is that of Hafen Slawkenbergius, a man equipped with a huge nose admired by both women and men. The story comes after Tristram's explanation of

how nature has mischievously equipped his ancestors and, in particular, the male line of the house with small noses. Following this injustice, Tristram's grandfather has been required by his wife to pay a sum of three hundred pounds a year. The reason she put forward was, namely, that he had "little or no nose" at all. Therefore, before going further, the narrator intends to clarify things by giving a clear definition of as trifling a word as 'nose':

I define a nose, as follows, — intreating only beforehand, and beseeching my readers, both male and female, of what age, complexion and condition soever, for the love of God and their own souls, to guard against the temptations and suggestions of the devil, and suffer him by no art or wile to put into my definition. — For by the word Nose, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word Nose occurs, I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less. (Sterne 1996:150)

However, by emphatically insisting on the word, occurring five times and three times with a capital letter in the above passage, things obviously turn differently. While pretending to escape popular undertones, Tristram is the one who plays the role of the tempting devil. Therefore, Tristram uses the "devious art of suggestion that manages to insinuate exactly what it purports to deny" (Furst 1988:189). The narratee is thus openly encouraged to replace the word 'nose' by the male organ each time it appears throughout the long chapter of noses and everywhere else in the book. This example is representative of the manner in which narratees are often encouraged to understand Tristram's words tendentiously rather than neutrally.

When it comes to the chapter "upon whiskers" (Sterne 1996: 242), Tristram gives the appearance of sexual innuendos where there are none, creating a context in which the word 'whiskers' becomes indecent and overladen with sexual overtones.

—Whiskers! cried the queen of Navarre, dropping her knotting ball, as La Fosseuse uttered the word—Whiskers, madam, said La Fosseuse, pinning the ball to the queen's apron, and making a courtesy as she repeated it. La Fosseuse's voice *was naturally soft and low*, yet 'twas an articulate voice: and every letter of the word Whiskers fell distinctly upon the queen of Navarre's ear—Whiskers! cried the queen, laying a greater stress upon the word, and as if she had still distrusted her ears—Whiskers! replied La Fosseuse, repeating the word a third time—There is not a cavalier, madam, of his age in Navarre, continued the maid of honour, pressing the page's interest upon the queen, that has so gallant a pair—Of what? cried Margaret, smiling—Of whiskers, said La Fosseuse, with infinite modesty. (Sterne 1996:242)

Actually, whiskers and especially a pair of them have no apparent correspondent. But since the word "whiskers" is often preceded by a dash, suggesting pause and hesitancy and by such words as "thin gauze", "desire", "a voice naturally soft and low", all pointing to a possible erotic euphemism, readers tend to apply the same reasoning they used for the 'nose story' and attempt to find a sexual equivalent for whiskers. Additionally, characters' mixture between

exaggerated pathos and prudishness, when it comes to whiskers, evokes indecent connotations. Not to mention that the word is also capitalised and thus foregrounded.

As stated before, sexuality exceeds the plot and permeates the dialogue between narrator and narratee. For Ruth Perry (2002:51), following Freud's and Lacan's theories, language and sexuality coexist. According to the same author, "sex was just another language and language just another form of sex" and "all the conversations in *Tristram Shandy* are sexual" (Perry 2002:51-52).

The most dynamic, flirtatious, and agonistic relationship between narrator and narratee in Sterne's novel is that between Tristram and his female reader. He continuously teases her with sexual innuendoes and then tenderly and coquettishly addresses her as "my dear girl". He chides her for her wild imagination and then suggests that Satan is playing with her imagination. According to Helen Ostovich (2006:180), Tristram is hypersensitive to Madam's sexuality by constantly warning her against potentially obscene episodes in the narrative, often implying that his imagination is pure, while hers is prurient. His protest that noses are mere noses is a case in point (Ostovich 2006:180). However, Satan is in fact Tristram himself, tantalizing his narratees with the promise of bawdy stories.

Now don't let Satan, my dear girl, in this chapter, take advantage of any one spot of rising ground to get astride of your imagination, if you can any ways help it; or if he is so nimble as to slip on—let me beg of you, like an unback'd filly, to frisk it, to squirt it, to jump it, to rear it, to bound it—and to kick it, with long kicks and short kicks, till like Tickletoby's mare, you break a strap or a crupper, and throw his worship into the dirt.—You need not kill him.— (Sterne 1996:155)

3. Sex as Rhetoric

However, most importantly, sexuality, as a driving force for Tristram's narrative, is present in the telling of the story too. There is a close relationship between rhetoric and eroticism, what we may call 'textual erotics', because the rhetoric construction of a narrative invites its audience to follow a certain trajectory of desire (Scholes et al. 2006:208). Peter Brooks (1984:37) argues that the reading of plot is a form of desire that carries us forward and urges us to finish the text. We may talk about the desire to tell, to subjugate, and seduce the listener and the desire to listen and to be implicated in "the thrust of a desire that never can quite speak its name" (Brooks 1984:61). Goody (2007:30) also makes the connection between storytelling and seduction: "[telling] a story, creating one's fictional biography or personal life, is part of many a courting encounter. The story and its telling either seduce or prevent seduction, as with Shaharazad and Sinbad". Hence, one of the most important attributes of the storyteller is to captivate and enthrall his public and to make sure that his story is a success. Tristram's narrative is a very long foreplay with his narratee in which language is brimming with sexual tension: double-entendres, innuendoes, and asterisks to mark omissions of possibly indecent words (aposiopesis). Such a narrative postpones through various tricks any satisfaction of the reader's curiosity.

How does one translate sexuality into rhetoric or, more specifically, what rhetoric strategies does Tristram use to seduce his various narratees? One rhetorical device is the use of *anticipatory constituents*. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short (2007:181) introduce and discuss these constituents in the syntax, thus by an *anticipatory constituent*, they mean any subordinate or dependent constituent which is non-final. Their main function is “to bring an element of suspense into the syntax” (Leech and Short 2007:182). One of the examples given by Leech and Short to illustrate how an anticipatory constituent work in the sentence is: “[that they have suffered through negligence] is the truth” (2007: 181). However, what I argue here is that the use of this rhetorical device can be extended to the whole narrative too. Due to the fact that they anticipate a certain key moment in the novel, before that moment actually happens, they are part of the discourse or plot. A good storyteller uses *anticipatory constituents* to create suspense and to grab the listener’s attention. As it will be seen, Tristram overuses this rhetorical device and instead of creating suspense, it has the opposite effect, it dilutes the narrative and postpones the satisfaction of the narratees’ desire; the desire to listen and the desire for closure.

The narrator continuously teases his narratees with the promise of lewd stories. This is one major trick he uses to justify *tellability*, with the risk of falling into the dark side of *tellability*. However, his stories stay in the realm of allusiveness and innuendoes, they never become explicit.

No wonder I itch so much as I do, to get at these amours—They are the choicest morsel of my whole story! and when I do get at ’em—assure yourselves, good folks—(nor do I value whose squeamish stomach takes offence at it) I shall not be at all nice in the choice of my words!—and that’s the thing I have to declare. (Sterne 1996:236)

Superlatives like “choicest” or the assurance he gives to his narratees that they are going to listen to something absolutely outrageous are all meant to arouse their curiosity and keep them prisoners of this narrative. Two hundred pages later, he still does not deliver the “choicest morsel” of his story (the love affair between the widow Wadman and uncle Toby). Ironically, after a long line of such assurances, Tristram changes his mind and asks his narratees to write the story for him. He again tantalises his readership with the existence of a “choicest morsel” at the disposal of the storyteller. His confession that he has hastened to this part of the story with earnest desire is plain irony, since all he has ever done is to delay the moment as much as possible; he willingly gets lost in various digressions.

Let us drop the metaphor.

—And the story too—if you please: for though I have all along been hastening towards this part of it, with so much earnest desire, as well knowing it to be the choicest morsel of what I had to offer to the world, yet now that I am got to it, any one is welcome to take my pen, and go on with the story for me that will—I see the difficulties of the descriptions I’m going to give—and feel my want of powers. (Sterne 1996:443)

In fact, one may argue that Tristram's narrative is all based on the anticipatory factor; he anticipates more than he can or will actually deliver. As stated, all his narrative is a constant foreplay with the narratee, offering little or no satisfaction of the latter's curiosity. He continuously promises to deliver the story of his birth and he does it only late in the novel. This is also the case of the much promised chapter on 'whiskers' and 'buttons', all overtly advertised as erotic euphemisms. Multiple meanings and sexual overtones intensify Tristram's 'intercourse' with his narratees. Ostovich argues that the physical presence of the readers in Sterne's novel, Tristram's disputatious conversations with them, and his "sly combination of indecorously overlapping meanings" (2006:174) encourage a different type of literary intercourse with the reader. In fact, if we extrapolate Tristram's almost erotic relationship with Madam Reader to the reading of the whole novel, the act of reading itself becomes sexual, in which the readers' desire for closure is seldom if ever fulfilled. One can even venture to say that at the core of the novel there is no sex but the promise of sex.

Anticipatory constituents function also as evaluative comments, abstracts, or trailers that can justify 'tellability'. To put it simply, *anticipatory constituents* advertise for a story. Even negative, evaluative words, many times coupled with sexual innuendos, can tease the reader more than positive superlatives.

when a single word and no more uttered from the opposite side of the table drew every one's ears towards it—a word of all others in the dictionary the last in that place to be expected—a word I am ashamed to write—yet must be written—must be read—illegal—uncanonical—guess ten thousand guesses, multiplied into themselves— rack—torture your invention for ever, you're where you was—In short, I'll tell it in the next chapter. (Sterne 1996:222, my emphasis)

These stories are often far from their trailers and their endings are anti-climactic. This is in fact the case of the much advertised love affair between uncle Toby and Mrs. Wadman, which ends in comic bathos since Toby is sexually impaired. As stated, the tales Tristram constantly promises to deliver seldom materialise (one story that never gets to be told is the one about the right and wrong end of a woman). Actually, the discussion could be extended to the whole novel since there is considerable debate about whether *Tristram Shandy* has an open ending or is just unfinished due to the fact that its author died.

However, when some of these stories do materialise after many pages or chapters, Tristram flouts *the memory principle*, which states that the burden on the reader's immediate syntactic memory should be reduced "by avoiding major *anticipatory constituents*" (Leech and Short 2007:184). The principle reflects a constraint which affects the listener or the reader. In other words, the more Tristram postpones his stories, the more his narratees are likely to forget all about them.

If the narratees are baffled by Tristram's rhetorical gymnastics (judging after his repeated entreaty "bear with me"), the 'real' readers or mock readers expect Tristram to digress and never

finish the story. This is part of the game; the readers distance themselves from the narratees and laugh with Tristram and Sterne at their expense. They know deep down that there is no juicy love affair between Toby and the widow since the former is sexually impaired. The contractual nature of storytelling, which stipulates that a storyteller has to deliver a story while the listener/reader has certain obligations too, takes a different dimension when isolated from the context of the book. The reader expects Tristram to continuously flout all storytelling rules: if he did not do so, he would breach the contract.

4. Conclusion

In the absence of a story proper, Tristram, the playful narrator of his life story has to resort to other tricks in order to make his autobiography ‘tellable’. Hence, Tristram embeds in his narrative stories full of not-so-subtle sexual overtones, reminding the reader of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Additionally, sexual innuendoes suffuse the conversation between Tristram and his various narratees, especially Madam Reader. However, most importantly, sexuality or eroticism becomes an important rhetorical strategy that, through the use of *anticipatory constituents*, invites the narratees to follow a certain trajectory of desire.

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