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Tristram Shandy and the Problematics of Origin: The Hobby-Horsical World of Infinite Jest

Research Article
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Abstract
The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, one of the most unorthodox works ever written, substantially differs from most of the novels of its time and later eighteenth century in its plot, narration, and treatment of characters. In this paper, different aspects of the novel that challenge and deconstruct the points of origin in the life and character of Tristram Shandy are examined. It is demonstrated that *Tristram Shandy* detaches itself from the unconditional stages in the traditional narratives that are often taken for granted, including the birth as the genesis of the characters, a solid belief in the purposefulness of a narrative for moral or educational ends, the fixity of beginnings, and the rational order of ideas in the human mind. The article is divided into four major parts, including the birth, history, life, and human subjectivity, and aims at showing several unique aspects of the novel while being mindful of the close reading of the text as well. To this end, the article concentrates particularly on the events revolving around Tristram Shandy, his father Walter, and Uncle Toby. The Lockean association of ideas, which Sterne turns into a parody of Locke's original thesis later in the narrative, is explored in the article as well.

Keywords: association of ideas, origin, history, self, Sterne, Locke

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Introduction

When *Tristram Shandy* was written and published in nine volumes during the course of eight years from 1759 to 1767, it shocked Sterne's contemporary *men of letters* and received many negative reviews from them. This novel, with two different plots[1] (Tristram`s account of his own life and his father and Uncle Toby`s stories), is so amorphous and unconventional that upon first picking it up- "we are overwhelmed by a sense of chaos" (Shklovsky, 1991, p.147). *Tristram Shandy*, however, is not confined to these plots and sometimes even mocks the concern for a "plot" (Hall, 1963, p.136). Obsessed with what is known as the "*digressive* method," that is, explaining the present conditions just by referring back to the past, Tristram sets out to write his own biography. However, this attempt goes haywire as Tristram learns how uncertain, far-fetched and *ungraspable* the origins of birth, life, and mind are. In other words, Tristram, quite unprecedented except perhaps for the hero of Cervantes, learns to live a life without origins or foundations; as his narrative unfolds his life, he decides to be *joyful* rather than *dismal* or melancholic about it. This article endeavors to bring together different points of unconditional origins of narrative or characters in the eighteenth-century novels and demonstrate how *Tristram Shandy* not only deconstructs these points of origin, such as birth or opening of the narrative, but also provides a new philosophy of mirth and jest. The *indecisive* nature of beginnings, the protean life, and the disruption of selfhood and ideas are the central themes of the present study. Although numerous works have been written on the unconventional narration of the novel or the association of ideas, few have focused on the problematics of origins and the philosophical *implications* that it brings about.

The stereotypical eighteenth-century novels almost always set off with the protagonist's birth; it is always taken for granted that the life of the hero must start with his birth. Since birth does not require an explanation for itself and is the unconditional stage of all individuals, writers often set off their novels with the birth and the genealogy of the protagonist. For example, chapter II of Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) is titled, "of Mr. Joseph Andrews, his birth, parentage, education, and great endowment; with a word or two concerning ancestors" (2001, p. 2). Fielding tries to come up with an objective account for the origin of Joseph Andrews and makes sure that all things are straightened out; characters, for instance, are introduced before the story is narrated. The rock-solid confidence in human origins, embedded in the Christian tradition, marks the eighteenth century's novels; whereas, Tristram is obsessed with the idea of his birth from the very beginning and does not wish to take it for granted.

The Eighteenth-century novels were often considered to account for psychological and moral growth along with the physical growth of the protagonist. The *bildungsroman* of the story was *essential* to the didactic purposes, which had cast a long shadow over the novels at the time. Johnson (2009) wrote in the "Preface to Shakespeare" that "the end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing" (p. 359). Even when Shakespeare, "the faithful mirror of manners and life" (p. 355), did not follow the required instructions, his genius would fall short: "he sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he

seems to write without any moral purpose" (p. 362). This *didacticism* is implicit in most novels in eighteenth-century English literature, especially those starting with the words: *the history of…* where the course of events is *teleological* and *consequential*. In such histories, all the events bind up for an ultimate meaning right at the end. *The Life of Tristram Shandy* is a *life* rather than a *history*; it is not a teleological and purposeful course of events but *rather* an arbitrary or chaotic one. "Commitment in the Shandy world is by hobbyhorse"[2] (Hall, 1963, p.132); in other words, the life of Tristram could have taken a completely different course than it did in the story and the events which follow up are only *fragments* of Tristram`s life. *Tristram Shandy* represents such a chaotic and amorphous life that it cannot fit into a preordained shape.

In the context of eighteenth-century thought, subjectivity and self were deemed reliable and utterly accessible to the writers of the time. On the one hand, Cartesians regarded the human subject as reliable, containing archetypical elements and innate ideas that referred to God and was warranted by God (Descartes, 2008, p. 38). Sterne, on the other hand, implements Locke's empirical epistemology to describe a human self with no point of *absolute* reference. In this respect, Locke (1959) divided the ideas into *simple* and *complex* ones and believed "knowledge is nothing but the perception of the connection and agreement [between ideas], or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas" (p. 167). Sterne takes on this view and adopts it for his own purposes by rejecting that the association of ideas follows up a *regulative* pattern in nature.

In contrast, Sterne maintains that the association of ideas in mind is quite *haphazard* and most of Tristram Shandy`s ideas are just *random* associations, thus making "the first stream of consciousness novel" (Cash, 1955, p. 125). For Tristram, the association of ideas does not follow any regulative or archetypical pattern; instead, it follows habits, passion, social, and cultural conditions. As exposited in the article, such a free association of ideas demonstrates how difficult it is to believe that our ideas could have a solid foundation.

Discussion

Once it was published, *Tristram Shandy* received many negative reviews from Sterne`s contemporaries. Samuel Johnson solemnly promised that "Nothing odd will do long, Tristram Shandy did not last" (Boswell, 1953, p. 696). Moreover, Samuel Richardson (2002) called it "execrable I cannot but call them [characters]" (p. 128). One of the main reasons for Sterne's contemporaries to take issue with the book was its *structure*; it abrogated almost all the standard conventions extant in the eighteenth-century British novels, including the concerns of the beginning and history of characters` development from infancy to maturity. *Tristram Shandy* is, in this sense, a novel *off-limits*, as is evident in Tristram's self-proclamation, "I should beg Mr. Horace's pardon; for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules nor to any man's rules that ever lived" (Sterne, 1980, p. 4). His approach to different confinements of his time was to go beyond them, provide his readers with an unorthodox experience of narrating his own life and ultimately dedicate his novel to the moon (p. 11).

Subversion of the Birth as the Genesis of Characters

Since the advent of the novel in English literature, there was little concern for the beginning of the story; in fact, it was quite straightforward that the best start for a novel was the birth of the main protagonist. The plot unfolded with the birth and continued until the growth and maturity. There are many such novels in the context of eighteenth-century literature; for instance, *The History of Tom Jones* (1749) starts with introducing a *supposedly* illegitimate child into the house of Mr. Allworthy (1985, p. 55). To narrate the stories, the protagonist should come into the world in the first place and by the grace of nature, it is his/her birth into the world that could be taken for granted. The notion of birth implied that no external forces determined the character of a child and his nature could be molded into a good shape by education and moral teaching later on in the future. Therefore, individuals, particularly children, could be controlled and handled *rationally* through pedagogical and religious disciplines; in other words, to begin the protagonist's narrative, it was *naturally* and *metaphysically* sufficient to set off with birth. There was nothing before it that could affect the narrator's life except perhaps a non-deceiving God who guaranteed the reliability of human perception and cognition.

In this regard, *Tristram Shandy* is pretty much against the current of eighteenth-century fiction; Tristram's birth is not taken for granted. The narrator does not regard his birth as the beginning of the story; instead, his life has begun much earlier than he is born. His Uncle Toby states: "*My Tristram's misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world*" (Sterne, 1980, p. 3).[3] His birth is precisely what strikes Tristram that this event is not only a beginning but an end to a chain of somehow sad and melancholic events. The birth is not regarded as something *given* but is the result of certain material conditions such as conception, the marriage of his parents and their social status that determine all aspects of his life later on, as Tristram confesses at the opening of the novel:

> 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; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing (p. 1).

Apart from Tristram's digression to events in the past to explain what he is at present, Tristram's conception suggests his lack of control in his "cast of mind" (p. 1). Besides the material conditionality of the birth, perhaps the most remarkable thing about Tristram's birth is his reliance on *chance* in the events relating to his birth. Tristram questions his parents' control over their actions during his conception or the event of his naming (Tristram is the accidental conflation of *Trismegistus*). "Tristram no more than starts the story of his life by describing his conception than he interrupts its progress" (Hall, 1963, p. 131) and forces the reader to face up with the problem of birth at the beginning of the novel. The birth, viewed from a conventional standpoint, is problematic because it is inconceivable how to trace the birth back to solid ground as the beginning of Tristram`s life. Since the forces that govern his humor, body, and temperament before the birth are haphazard and sometimes authorized by

mere chance, it is impossible to mold them into one singular narrative.

Since the beginning parallel to birth is ruled out and the birth of Tristram is the ending result of many courses of events, he can hardly be responsible for what happens to him, much like his uncle`s lack of control over the results of his hobbyhorse (i.e., sieges and war). Tristram stops to be a carrier of meaning for the story's overall purpose and turns the traditional narration over its head by making himself the object of scrutiny rather than proceeding the narrative to introduce the characters, settings, and events (Iser, 1988, p. 25). Unlike the traditional eighteenth-century protagonist whose blank slate of his/her nature is developed a straightforward manner *willingly*, Tristram's character is already hard-wired and conditioned; his ship is already embarked. Thus, his task is to go back to his earlier life to trace and explore the causes of his character and humor. Tristram *regresses* into his past and usually before his birth to unlock traces of his origin and temperament. The notion of birth as the most significant and unconditional state of man is thereby subverted and supplanted by material conditions, chance and *selective* events, which take place before his birth.

The notion of birth is deconstructed through the fact that every interpretation of birth is conditional, selective, and subjective. Therefore, one cannot locate the truth of Tristram's birth because there is no such a thing as the absolute beginning for man. The previous idea conditions every subsequent idea of birth; the birth is preceded by conception and conception by the political and economic state of the parents, their marriage, etc. The more we get back, the more haphazard and divergent the events would become. According to this *Shandean* philosophy, birth is an ending to a whole chain of events. When the definition of birth has turned out to be selective, it also becomes subjective or, as Tristram puts it, a *hobby-horsical* matter. The narrative of birth is not accomplished at the end and goes on *ad infinitum* from one point to the next. Tristram never really gets to start his novel; instead, he selects a stage to start from, *merely* for the practical purpose of writing a novel. Therefore, when he cannot ground the notion of birth on any solid foundations, he turns to pragmatic reasons that one must select a starting-point, however *arbitrary* it might be, to write the life of oneself.

History vs. Life

As mentioned previously, a typical eighteenth-century protagonist has his life started with his birth and then aspires to grow morally, mentally, along with his natural biological growth. The course of his life has a teleological movement towards the future in which his *history* is fulfilled and the protagonist is finally in a blissful and satisfying condition at the end. In the eighteenth century, most English novels follow up this pattern, such as *Tom Jones, Pamela*, *Joseph Andrews* and *Moll Flanders.* Sterne, however, is no such writer; he makes Tristram defy any attempt at self-perfection and moral or mental growth. On the one hand, Tristram is the narrator of his life and his confrontation of past events is quite conspicuous; on the other hand, he is not entirely successful with the *progress* of his story from the very start or, better still, he never gets wiser or even better looking. It takes three volumes for him to be born; the first one deals with his baptism and one volume with five-year-

old Tristram, who gets himself involved with the sash window accident. The rest of the narrative is not so much about Tristram himself and shifts its focus from Tristram to Uncle Toby with his campaigns and abortive love affair. This type of writing stands in sheer contrast with *histories* rampant in the novels of the time. Iser (1988) meticulously contrasts *life* with *history*:

> This kind of life is in direct contrast to the history, for instead of binding all events together in an ultimate meaning, it expands every single incident out into its prehistory, showing that the character of events is such that they need not necessarily have taken the course that they did. While the history is drawn together by the meaning of its end, life explodes into the imponderable. (p. 3).

However, Tristram's life is not narrated just to contrast with the novels of the time; it goes beyond the merely critical stance towards writing and narration. It is safe to say "that structure of the novel is not completely defined by the plots" (Hall, 1963, p. 136) and is turned into comical gesture with disruption, digression, and flashbacks. Tristram plays with some of the deliberate misunderstandings in the novel like trying to unravel Uncle Toby's affliction by explaining "monstrous wound upon his groin" (Sterne, 1980, p. 411) where, in fact, he is not hit in his genitals, "We thought, Mr. Trim, it had been more in the middle" (p. 451). The reader's expectation is thus disrupted and one of the supposed themes (i.e., malfunction of Uncle Toby) of the novel is not at all there in the first place. Tristram allows his narrative to be steered by his fancy that diverts the course of narrative with its whimsical twists and turns, for example, in the case of his exploration of the history of noses (Vol. IV), or Walter Shandy's encyclopedia for Tristram. Sterne "mocks the concept of a novel as a vehicle moving towards a climax, and... also mocks the reader's concern for reaching that climax" (Hall, 1963, p. 143). Besides, the narrative can distract the reader by a series of never-ending accidents and misunderstandings that get in the way of *unraveling* any past events.

His slow progress in the story is due to his commitment to the principle of causality and, in part, Locke's notion of causality. It functions on the assumption of the association of *ideas*: "a cause is that which makes any other thing, either simple idea, substance or mode, begin to be; and an effect is that which had its beginning from some other thing" (Locke, 1959, p. 434). Even though it is plausible that one should assume a cause for an effect, Sterne, unlike Locke, claims that it is not so much clear whether causes themselves are not the effects of other causes and *ultimately* are not grounded in the natural world. Tristram is dubious of Locke's overt proclamation of finding origins and final causes in nature since every event introduced in the story has a pre-history. Tristram endeavors to grasp the unconditional origin of his life with his writings, but every time he is confronted with a loose chain of association of ideas and fails to trace the life back to its absolute, unconditional beginning. Therefore, he falls into *regressus ad infinitum,* a world where the final causes cannot be determined (Iser, 1988).

This issue becomes fully-fledged when Tristram tries to explain his birth. He pretends to follow the principle of causality to keep the story *coherent*. After all, "a plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality"

(Forster, 1955, p. 86) and that one could assume that *Tristram Shandy* obscures the causality principle; in other words, he sometimes changes or reverses the order of cause and effect. The life that is supposed to move forward is forced to turn back to explain the previous events. This type of narrative is hard to follow, making it impossible to find a final cause for a particular event. This problem of causality makes many readers confused over the causation principle at work in the story since it is not founded on any *regulative* pattern; rather, it is based on the *subjective* and *contextual* association of cause and effect. As a result, this association of ideas cannot represent past life because of its constraint to a particular context; the cause and effect do not regulate based on *a priori* principles but are dependent on the context and the whims and wishes of the narrator's subjectivity:

> When a man sits down to write a history…he knows no more than his heels what lets and confounded hindrances he is to meet within his way, or what advance he may be led, by one excursion or another, before all is over. Could a historiographer drive on his history, as a muleteer drives on his mule, straight forward; for instance, from Rome all the way to Loreto, without ever once turning his head aside either to the right hand or to the left, he might venture to foretell you to an hour when he should get to his journey's end; but the thing is, morally speaking, impossible: For, if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid (Sterne, 1980, p. 26).

For Tristram, writing down a *history* is next to impossible since *life* cannot be adequately represented in words and some events include experiences that are unfathomable like those of moods and passions; Tristram also refers to several "irrelevant" events. Do we have to know all of his father's theories or the events about the midwife? Why does Tristram insist on irrelevant stories?

His deliberate reference to these events marks a unique aspect of the novel: its representation of *life* that does not have to be reduced to plots. As in *life*, novels can also be without directions and purposes. *Life* cannot always be headed in a steadfast direction and Tristram's hobbyhorse "delays the final illumination" (Hall, 1963, p. 135), making it all the more difficult for the plot of the story to go on a straight line. From another perspective, life can never be reduced to a chronological order of *history* because it is not identical to its representations. A representation is a frozen image of thought grasping different moments, whereas life is a dynamic, moody and sometimes an unconscious stream of thoughts, emotions and irrelevant events. Tristram criticizes the eighteenth century's autobiographical novels for ignoring the gap between life and its representations, yet he ironically continues to write down his life to expose the very *illusory* framework that he finds fault with. Thereby, for Sterne, the task of *Tristram Shandy* is to find loopholes in the narrative techniques of the eighteenth-century novelists while representing life in its full potential and vitality.

Whence to Begin? That is the Question!

The question of why *Tristram Shandy* has no fixed beginning still remains provocative and controversial among critics. The act of beginning the novel is always *deferred* by Tristram and is *intentionally* played out throughout the narrative. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of his beginnings is his reluctance to start the novel from one point rather than the other. Every time the association of ideas coerces him to continue the narrative before establishing the beginning, be it his birth, death of his brother, or even uncle Toby's story. If we take his conception as the beginning of the novel, then he must return to describe his father's habit of winding the clock and uncle Toby's sieges, yet he is not born until the end of volume III. In other words, the opening of the novel emphasizes the procedure of *conditionality*; all facts, presented in the beginning, refer back to conditions, which *ceaselessly* turn incomprehensible and inaccessible and keep pushing back the narrative further into the past. *Tristram Shandy* does not point to a fixed beginning but reveals the unstable and fluctuating nature of beginnings in general.

As was mentioned in the first part, one of the beginnings of the novel is his conception or his birth. In contrast to his birth as the beginning, Tristram marks the death of his brother Bobby as the beginning in volume IV:

> From this moment, I am to be considered as heir-apparent to the Shandy family and it is from this point properly, that the story of my life and my Opinions sets out; with all my hurry and precipitation I have but been clearing the ground…" (p. 236).

Death, just like birth, can be both a beginning and an end. Birth, as the beginning, introduced us to an endless pre-conditional complication before Tristram's actual birth. Death is an end for his brother, Bobby, but is a beginning for Tristram as the representative of the house of Shandy and heir to his father's land and title. However, instead of following in his father's footsteps, Tristram, appareled in his eighteenth-century breeches, waistcoat and periwig, lays claim only to his own wishes and *idiosyncrasies*. It appears that "the end seems like a beginning and the beginning like an end" (Iser, 1988, p. 9) and no character could ever have an original opening in the novel. Tristram's strive for originality creates "the comic confusion" (Hall, 1963, p. 134), making him try his luck for an original set-up, even when he knows it fails.

In Volume. VI, where the novel is halfway through, Tristram speaks of beginning his novel again: "I am now beginning to get fairly into my work…I make no doubt but I shall be able to go on with my uncle Toby's story, and my own, in a tolerable straight line" (Sterne, 1980, p. 333). However, the result is not the beginning in a straight manner; if running into a straight line is the way to begin the story, then Tristram counters the very possibility of a straight narrative and thereby a genuine beginning. The straight line of narration does not only require a fixed beginning but an end as well. If the straight line from beginning to end is the simplest way forward, does Tristram follow the straight line?

The answer might be negative without a second thought; however, Tristram equivocates the straight line with the law of gravity: "Pray can you tell

me, that is, without anger, before I write my chapter upon straight lines by what mistake…your men of wit and genius have all along confounded this line, with the line of GRAVITATION?" (p. 334)

The straight line of a story must have a stable beginning and an end so that it can be narrated with ease, whereas gravitation is a reminder of the free fall of objects. It is readily discernible that *Tristram Shandy* is somehow shaped by the *continual* fall of objects. Contrary to the association of ideas, which is far-fetched and abstract, "the word 'gravity' [has] the physical weight and concreteness" (Burckhardt, 1961, p. 70) in the novel. For example, the sash window accident or the stone falling on uncle Toby's groin are all the consequences of gravity. If we think about it, a significant part of the story depends on the notion of free fall. Indeed, free fall is more or less a straight line, except that it is a straight line without *teleology* and purpose; it is not clear where the object during the free fall winds up. Therefore, this straight line does not reach the fulfillment of a goal; rather, it is *unpredictable* and *gratuitous*. Here, Tristram *playfully* introduces us to a straight line that lacks direction and purpose. Tristram is thereby confounded by men of wit and learning who have mistaken gravitation with a straight line, whereas he thinks of gravity as a kind of gap that will get indirect, parabolic, or in any direction by chance (Burckhardt, 1961, p. 80).

Sterne provides multiple beginnings, and each one has many pre-histories that make the beginnings seem like an end to a whole chain of process. None of them solves the problem of the conditionality of beginnings. By applying the same storytelling principles in the eighteenth century, Sterne criticizes the *apparent* naturalness of conventional beginnings. This multiplicity of beginnings undermines the validity of the unconditional aspects of the novels as well as exposing the selective nature of origin, that is, where to begin the narrative. The ending of the novel also appears to indicate the same interpretation. However, this issue is disputable among Shandean scholars. Most of Sterne's contemporaries and later Victorian critics like Bagehot (1891) agreed that Tristram Shandy is a "book without plan or order" (p. 104) and without an actual opening and closing, though some other critics like Wayne Booth have a different view. Booth (1951) considers the *haphazardness* of the ending to be historically inaccurate and contrary to the process of its writing. He asserts that "Sterne's work was not so haphazard as has been believed" (p. 173). Historically speaking, Sterne (1935) had more or less determined the end of the novel in his letters and had planned initially to go beyond nine volumes, then he probably grew tired of the book due to its reception and his ill conditions made him change his mind (p. 284).[4] Booth (1951) also points out that, at the end of the ninth volume, Sterne should have left something behind for the next volume as he titillates his readers` curiosity at the ending lines of the previous eight volumes (p. 175). Therefore, for Booth, the ending seems more decided and less rickety than the beginnings.

The Hollowness of the Subject

One of the most significant aspects of *Tristram Shandy* is the reference to the philosophy of John Locke, one of the leading figures in the British Empiricism of the seventeenth century whose influence on Sterne is enormous.

Sterne once remarked to Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard, a French journalist and his friend, that Locke's philosophy everywhere had "shaped his thought and manner of procedure" in writing *Tristram Shandy* (Cross, 1925, p.277). Locke's notions of self and epistemology play a critical role in the exposition of the story where the "train of ideas" and their associations are concerned.

Locke (1959) believed that all our knowledge comes from our senses and there is no other gateway to acquire knowledge; therefore, the first principle of knowledge derives from *sense* experience (p. 48-9). The knowledge is shaped in the form of *ideas,* which are abstract entities organized in the human mind. The primary form of knowledge arises from the combination of *simple ideas*: the ideas that are immediate and essential for an experience like the idea of shape, size, motion, and solidarity (*primary* qualities), color, smell, taste (*secondary* qualities), and the like. They ultimately form *complex ideas,* which are the real source of knowledge and data; they are unconsciously formed in mind and prepare the next stage for combining these associations. Locke (1959) maintains that the association of simple ideas is caused by archetypes dependent on the natural world: "for the attaining of knowledge and certainty, it is requisite that we have determined ideas: and, to make our knowledge real, it is requisite that the ideas answer their archetypes" (pp. 232-3). Of course, Locke initially considered the association of ideas as a flaw and a hindrance to natural reason and even madness (Cash, 1955, p. 127). There is a dispute about whether Locke confuses the association of ideas with the train of ideas and vice versa, particularly when they were brought together later on by philosophers like David Hartley and used under the same name. The dispute, however, is quite harmless for our present argument since Sterne thought of the mind as a constant flux of ideas, rather than an exposition of human knowledge in general. "The psychology of the train of ideas, central in Locke's epistemology, is a more likely explanation of Tristram's consciousness" (p. 133); however, it must be noted that Sterne seems to regard the train of ideas as synonymous with the association of ideas.

Then, Sterne comes along to grapple with human subjects and utilizes Locke's association of ideas for his own *purpose*. While Locke found confidence in the association of ideas regulated by archetypes, Tristram Shandy is skeptical of the naturalness of this association:

> That, from an unhappy association of ideas which have no connection in nature, it so fell out at length, that my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up, but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popped into her head, vice versa: which strange combination of ideas, the sagacious Locke, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all other sources of prejudice whatsoever (Sterne, 1980, p. 5).

If the human mind shapes the formation of complex ideas and it tends to use these ideas *freely*, how can these archetypes regulate such association in the subject? It is Locke's task to pinpoint precisely the archetypical relation of ideas. He maintains that these archetypes are the result of the natural understanding of the world created by God. Our job is to build upon this system

of ever-growing knowledge by enriching our experience. Stern maintains, however, that the tension between vague archetypes and human freedom is unresolvable in the philosophy of Locke, and often the human freedom takes over our ideas and combines them *haphazardly*. In other words, the foundation of Locke's association of ideas based on ontology (i.e., nature) is substituted by psychology (i.e., motives of subjects). By understanding the association as such, the ideas could be associated because of habit, desire, or whim and *hobbyhorses*. For example, the association of clock sounds with the sexual act is a personal association and entirely subjective for Mrs. Shandy. Although Stern does not reject the view of archetypes and the natural world as the foundation of our knowledge entirely, he believes there is no guarantee for regulated association and this "doctrine imposes a terrible burden of proof on Locke" (Traugott, 1954, p. 34).

What is then the foundation of the association of ideas? Sterne's answer is the human subject. It ditches the Lockean principle into a strict corner where experience loses its touch with the natural world, and the self is guided with no guarantee for cognitive reliability of knowledge. In other words, the association of ideas becomes somewhat arbitrary and self-willed, leaving us with a "solipsistic view of the universe" (Hall, 1963, p. 139). It is no longer a matter of referring back to the natural world in which Locke could determine the formation of complex ideas; instead, "the self is thrown back upon itself" (Iser, 1988, p. 15). The subject loses its archetypical foundation and is ruled by habits, interest, and sometimes *sheer* chance. Locke (1959) somehow had anticipated this by saying "that sometimes a boisterous passion hurries our thoughts, as a hurricane does our bodies, without leaving us the liberty of thinking on other things…" (p. 319).

Nevertheless, Locke never considered the train of ideas as fanciful, whimsical associations since it made his effort for building up a coherent epistemology pointless. Sterne, however, radicalizes Locke`s notion by claiming that various personal tastes and backgrounds govern the succession of ideas in different people. Thereby, it is next to impossible to determine the motivation behind the succession of ideas since such a combination is multi-faceted and often time *topsy-turvy*. Sterne concludes that the succession of ideas is somewhat subjective and personal; for example, there is no reason to generalize why Mrs. Shandy associates winding up the clock with the sexual act or why Uncle Toby's metaphors are all about sieges, garrisons, and soldiers. Therefore, for Sterne, the personal and subjective association of ideas (projected by the mind itself) precede any other definitive principles that can play a role in the process of association, be it time and space, archetypes of nature, or innate ideas.

Since Lockean self has no transcendental origin in practice and cannot avoid the arbitration of association of ideas, the subject, beyond any conceptualization, is responsible for anchoring the complex ideas. Contrary to Descartes, who embedded innate ideas in mind, Locke's mind was a blank slate with no essential aspects written over it. Sterne replaced the Lockean archetypes with norms of communication rooted in history, society and time; furthermore, "the guaranteed reality" is transformed into a normative, contingent interplay of subjects. "This makes it clear that the association of

ideas as a norm of cognition is not an integral component of reality" (Iser, 1988, p. 18). The central doctrine of Locke is thus turned into a hobbyhorse and loses its touch with reality. If we consider the self as the carrier of ideas, then the self as the reflective observer is jeopardized and loses its universality. The self is more about social construction and personal desires than any universal notions.

Therefore, once the self has utterly lost its frame of reference and cannot have any essential parts, the novel turns into a theater for parodying the association principle. Sterne's destruction of the self is accompanied by normative criteria, which reveal the inadequacy of archetypes' universality in Lockean philosophy and innate ideas in Cartesian philosophy. In this respect, the deconstruction of the self makes Sterne's view rather close to the idea of Hume (1968), who considered the self to be an illusion and all concepts as "fictions of the mind" (pp. 48; 220) or for that matter, Nietzsche's view (1968) of the self as a construction: "The subject is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is" (p. 267). It is not without occasion that both Hume and Nietzsche applauded *Tristram Shandy*. Hume (1932) called it "the best book that has been writ by any Englishman these thirty years" (p. 269) and Nietzsche (1913) said Sterne was "the most liberated spirit of all time, in comparison with whom all others seem stiff, square, intolerant and boorishly direct"(p. 61).

When the self is void of all essential aspects, all characters are free to ride their hobby- horses and express their singular self in various ways. Tristram can be said to have decentered the subject and made it quite immeasurable for philosophy and science of his time. Characterizing the subject as such, Sterne goes against the entirety of mainstream perceptions of the self as a reliable, transcendental subject. Sterne puts the typical Rationalist's subject in a straitjacket by making it hollow and void of reference; simultaneously, he criticizes empirical associationist`s tendency to ground the association of ideas in the natural world by exposing the *arbitrariness* of the link between ideas; thereby killing two birds with one stone.

Conclusion

In this article, the notion of birth, history, and life in the eighteenth-century context, the problems of beginning a novel, and self and subjectivity were investigated. The relationship between birth and beginning was highlighted and shown to be problematic as much as any other beginning. The inclination of novelists to provide an objective, detailed account of the protagonist's life and growth was compared with *Tristram Shandy*'s refusal to linearity, moral, and mental progress in his narration. The typical perceptions of the subject and the self, prevalent in Empiricism and Rationalism, were sharply criticized by Sterne throughout the narrative. The self was stripped of essential aspects such as innate ideas or archetypes. The Lockean association of ideas, radicalized by Sterne, turned into a game of succession of ideas *ad infinitum.* The origins and motives of these associations were inaccessible and sometimes inexplicable, resulting in the idiosyncrasy of the self and, ultimately, its lack of *originality*. The many beginnings of the story showed how reluctant Tristram is about his origins since every time he tries to grasp the origin of his

story, a set of pre-histories stumbles upon the narration, and the origin story gets lost in the meanwhile. *Tristram Shandy* is, therefore, a novel without points of *origin* and unconditional principles.

Notes:

1. This is Hall's view in the "The Hobbyhorsical world of Tristram Shandy." The plot of the story is one of the most controversial issues of the novel ever since its publication. Tristram jumps over his narrative and often gets it pushed forward by his fancy. See, e.g., Toby Olshin's discussion about digression in Genre and Tristram Shandy: The Novel of Quickness. (1971). *Genre*, (4), 360-75.
2. Hobby-horses were originally figures in the old Morris dances. The literal meaning of the term refers to a stick with a horse's head attached. In the text, the implicit meaning of the term denotes tastes, wishes, entertainments, or any desire and derive which is alogical.
3. This is italicized in the original text.
4. "At present I am in my peaceful retreat, writing the ninth volume of Tristram-I shall publish but one this year, and the next I shall begin a new work of four volumes, which when finished, I shall continue Tristram with fresh spirit" (Sterne, 1935, p. 284). When he changes his mind due to reception: "The public, if I guess right, will have had enough, by the time they get to the end of your eighth volume" (p. 285) and when he was ill: "I miscarried of my tenth volume by the violence of a fever I just got through" (p. 294).

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