

“Lorenz Sterne” among German Philosophers: Reception and Influence Duncan Large (University of East Anglia)

Introduction

On 17 August 1913 the 21-year-old student **Walter Benjamin** has finished his summer term of study in Freiburg and is holidaying in the Tyrol before returning to take up his studies again in Berlin. He sends two postcards in quick succession to his friend Herbert Blumenthal (later Belmore) explaining that he’s putting off reading Kant’s *First Critique* till next month, but that in the meantime one of the books he’s taken with him is Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*. One might perhaps suspect that a fledgling philosopher who indulges in the guilty pleasure of reading fiction while he procrastinates will find Sterne conducive, and indeed the young Benjamin’s verdict on Sterne’s novel does not disappoint: “Sterne: Empfindsame Reise – mein Gehirn konnte so viel Genialität kaum aufnehmen”¹ (“Sterne: *Sentimental Journey* – my brain could scarcely absorb so much ingenuity”). Three years later Benjamin writes to Blumenthal of Sterne once again, calling him “Ein großer Schriftsteller, der das Echte so sehr sah daß er kaum mehr Kritik üben konnte”² – in Terry Eagleton’s translation “a great writer who has seen the authentic so accurately that he could almost renounce all criticism”.³

It is perhaps difficult to imagine any writer stretching Walter Benjamin’s brain this much, but such a rapturous response to Sterne is in fact typical of the novelist’s reception in the German-speaking world, and I am currently working on a monograph on German-language Sterne reception which attempts to map the extensive contours of this reception. In his pioneering and comprehensive 1953 study of *English Literature in Germany*, Lawrence Marsden Price goes so far as to assert that Sterne “proved to be a larger factor in German than in English literary history”.⁴ To date there have been four notable monographs on German Sterne reception; in chronological order, these are: Harvey Waterman Thayer, *Laurence Sterne in Germany: A Contribution to the Study of the Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Eighteenth Century* (1905); Gertrude Joyce Hallamore, *Das Bild Laurence Sternes in Deutschland von der Aufklärung bis zur Romantik* (1936); Peter Michelsen, *Laurence Sterne und der deutsche Roman des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* (1962); and Alain Montandon, *La réception de Laurence Sterne en Allemagne* (1985).⁵ However, the focus in these studies has been on Sterne’s early influence in Germany, i.e. during his lifetime and

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, vol. I (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 167-8.

² *Ibid.*, 349.

³ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), 155 n. 79.

⁴ Lawrence Marsden Price, *English Literature in Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953), 193.

⁵ Harvey Waterman Thayer, *Laurence Sterne in Germany: A Contribution to the Study of the Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1905; repr. New York: AMS Press, 1966); Gertrude Joyce Hallamore, *Das Bild Laurence Sternes in Deutschland von der Aufklärung bis zur Romantik* (Berlin: Ebering, 1936; repr. Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1967); Peter Michelsen, *Laurence Sterne und der deutsche Roman des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962; 2nd rev. edn 1972); Alain Montandon, *La réception de Laurence Sterne en Allemagne* (Clermont-Ferrand: Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de l’Université de Clermont-Ferrand II, 1985).

through till the end of the Romantic period in the 1830s. Indeed, the broad consensus of critical opinion to date has been that German reception of Sterne, though highly intense in the initial period, nevertheless came to a close by the mid-nineteenth century, with Heine as the last major figure in German letters to have been receptive to Sterne's charms. As Thayer puts it, "Sterne's influence in Germany lived its own life, and gradually and imperceptibly died out of letters, as an actuating principle".⁶ My research has found, though, that this by now traditional account of Sterne's reception in the German-speaking world – the consensus that Sterne's importance for German literature and culture is strictly confined and of historical interest only, petering out before the mid-nineteenth century – needs to be supplemented by a consideration of its persistence beyond the mid-nineteenth century above all, and outside of the circle of literary writers. My study is attempting to paint the picture of Sterne reception with a broader brush, then, for it traces Sterne's influence on German creative writers right up to the present, and crucially it also treats German Sterne reception by not just the literary classes (writers, critics, academics) and the general reading public, but also composers and musicians, social scientists and, precisely, philosophers.

Nineteenth-century Germany described itself (in the absence of a viable political identity) as the "Land der Dichter und Denker" ("Land of poets and thinkers"). In studies of German Sterne reception the "Dichter" have, naturally enough, held pride of place so far, but in this essay I want to focus instead on the "Denker", on Sterne's reception by German-language thinkers – and I use the term advisedly, for I will be dealing both with philosophers strictly speaking (whatever you take that definition to mean) and also figures – like Benjamin – whose work intersects with other intellectual traditions. I'll focus on the German-speaking world, for I have found that that is already easily copious (if not to say cornucopian) enough for my purposes. I want to take as my point of departure the paper which Bernhard Fabian gave to the Sterne bicentenary conference in 1968, subsequently published in 1971 in *The Winged Skull: "Tristram Shandy and Parson Yorick among some German Greats"*.⁷ Fabian's "German greats" already include a number of German philosophical writers from the Enlightenment and Romantic periods; I'll then press on chronologically through to the present, focussing on the period since 1830 and highlighting key figures in the history of Sterne's philosophical reception in Germany.

German Translations of Sterne

Before we broach the reception history proper, I should briefly summarise the history of German translations of Sterne's works, since the two are of course intimately related – although the one is not entirely dependent on the other. The first mention of Sterne in a German periodical comes as early as 1762,⁸ and his reputation was forged to quite an extent in the literary periodicals of the time, on the basis of reviews of the English editions and excerpted translations, independently of and even before the first full translation – *Das Leben und die Meynungen des Herrn Tristram Shandy*, by the Berlin physician Johann Friedrich Zückert – began appearing in Berlin in 1763. Zückert's translation was widely condemned (the level of familiarity with Sterne's original on the part of its readers was already extensive); instead, Sterne's reputation really took off in the German-speaking world with the

⁶ Thayer, *Laurence Sterne in Germany*, 156.

⁷ Bernhard Fabian, "Tristram Shandy and Parson Yorick among some German Greats", in Arthur H. Cash and John M. Stedmond (eds), *The Winged Skull: Papers from the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference* (London: Methuen; Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971), 194-209.

⁸ Thayer, *Laurence Sterne in Germany*, 12.

widely acclaimed translation of *A Sentimental Journey* by Johann Joachim Christoph Bode (1730-93), published as early as 1768, and this was to prove an instant and runaway success, stretching to six editions before the century was out. In 1774 Bode followed up on his initial triumph with a complete translation of *Tristram Shandy* (in a subscription edition to which most of the literary luminaries of his day subscribed); Bode's translations of the two novels then proceeded to sweep all before them and held the field till at least the turn of the nineteenth century. Five new *Tristram Shandy* translations were published between 1801 and 1881 (the majority of which, it must be said, derived more or less directly from Bode), but no fewer than eleven new translations of *A Sentimental Journey* appeared between 1802 and 1868 (it is of course, among other things, a much shorter text). Sterne had a mass-market appeal already in the nineteenth century, then, and the seal was set on this intense popular interest by the inclusion of Sterne's two novels in inexpensive, high-volume series like the "Bibliothek ausländischer Klassiker in deutscher Übertragung" ("Library of Foreign Classics in German Translation") published by the Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts (*TS* 1865, *ASJ* 1868), and Philipp Reclam's "Universal-Bibliothek" ("Universal Library": *ASJ* 1867, *TS* 1881).

In total over a dozen German translations of each of the novels have now been produced. Sterne has been very well served by German translators, and this has had a direct bearing on his popularity. Already by the end of the eighteenth century Sterne had rapidly become an accepted part of the intellectual accomplishments of the rising German *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated bourgeoisie). He may not have had quite the idolatrous impact of Shakespeare, but his reputation did nonetheless spread far beyond the chattering classes and it even filtered down to the level of popular material culture, as witnessed by the vogue – in Germany, as in Britain – for Lorenzo snuff-boxes.⁹

Sterne's Philosophical Reception in Germany, i) Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Let us turn now to focus on Sterne's reception among the more philosophically minded writers in Germany. As Fabian points out, **Hamann, Herder, Jacobi, Lichtenberg and Moses Mendelssohn** were all early champions of Sterne, and even **Kant** used Sterne as an example in his lectures on philosophical anthropology and pedagogics.¹⁰ Sterne's early reception by the German intelligentsia in general – even by a literary theoretician like Friedrich von Blanckenburg – was more as a moralist than as a novelist, since the German-language novel was in such a fledgling state when Sterne was writing (and being translated) that they didn't have any meaningful point of comparison.¹¹ In Fabian's words: "The dissociation of the philosophical message from the mimetic medium appears to be a distinctive feature of the German reception of Sterne."¹² Sterne's "sentimentalism" was received very early: **Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's** suggestion to Bode as to how to translate the title of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* led to a new coinage, "empfindsam", which rapidly gave birth to a powerful cultural phenomenon in the German-speaking world, known as *Empfindsamkeit*. Lessing was under the mistaken impression that Sterne had coined the term "sentimental" in English and hence that it required a neologism in German,¹³ such was the

⁹ Cf. W.G. Day, "Sternean Material Culture: Lorenzo's Snuff-Box and his Graves", in *The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe*, ed. Peter de Voogd and John Neubauer (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 247-58.

¹⁰ Fabian, "German Greats", 204f.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹² *Ibid.*, 203.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 202.

early preoccupation in Germany with Sterne's (philosophical) originality, which elicited praise from Moses Mendelssohn, Lessing and others.¹⁴ **Friedrich Schiller** was typical in reaching for the g-word (*Genie* - "genius") to describe Sterne – together with Shakespeare and Fielding – in *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* ("On Naive and Sentimental Poetry", 1795-96).¹⁵

After the turn of the nineteenth century Sterne continued to appeal to the leading German thinkers of the age, too. For **Hegel**, at a crucial point in the argument of the *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik* (*Aesthetics*), Sterne and Hippel together represent "das Ende der romantischen Kunst" ("the end of romantic art"):

deren Eigenthümlichkeit wir darin finden können, daß die Subjektivität des Künstlers über ihrem Stoffe und ihrer Production steht, indem sie nicht mehr von den gegebenen Bedingungen eines an sich selbst schon bestimmten Kreises des Inhalts wie der Form beherrscht ist, sondern sowohl den Inhalt als die Gestaltungsweise desselben ganz zu ihrer Gewalt und Wahl behält.¹⁶

the peculiarity of which we may find in the fact that the artist's subjective skill surmounts his material and its production because he is no longer dominated by the given conditions of a range of content and form already inherently determined in advance, but retains entirely within his own power and choice both the subject-matter and the way of presenting it.¹⁷

For **Schopenhauer**, in equally laudatory vein in the *Parerga und Paralipomena* (1851), *Tristram Shandy* is to be grouped rather with *Don Quixote*, *La nouvelle Héloïse* and *Wilhelm Meister* as "die Krone der Gattung" ("crowning the novelistic form").¹⁸ Schopenhauer is fond of dropping Sternean dicta, in English, into his arguments, both elsewhere in this text ("an ounce of a man's own wit is worth a tun of other people's")¹⁹ and in his correspondence ("there's something in names", he writes to David Asher in 1860).²⁰ As he was partially brought up in England, Schopenhauer's English was excellent and he clearly read *Tristram Shandy* in the original.²¹ As early as 1824 he suggested to his publisher Brockhaus that he

¹⁴ Ibid., 195-7. Bode applies the term "Originalgenie" to Sterne in the introduction to his German translation of *A Sentimental Journey*. See Laurence Sterne, *Yoricks empfindsame Reise durch Frankreich und Italien, nebst einer Fortsetzung von Freundeshand*, trans. Johann Joachim Christoph Bode (Nördlingen: Greno, 1986 [f.p. Hamburg and Bremen: Cramer, 1768]), "Der Übersetzer an den Leser" (5-19), 11.

¹⁵ Price, *English Literature in Germany*, 192.

¹⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, ed. Heinrich Gustav Hotho, vol. 10/2 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1837), 228.

¹⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 602.

¹⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena: Kleine philosophische Schriften*, ed. Raphael von Koeber, vol. 2 (Berlin: Boas, 1891), 469; cf. 296n.

¹⁹ Ibid., 511.

²⁰ Schopenhauer, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Arthur Hübscher, 2nd edn (Bonn: Bouvier, 1987), 481; cf. 121.

²¹ Cf. Arthur Hübscher, *Schopenhauer-Bibliographie* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1981).

might translate the novel himself, but (more's the pity!) Brockhaus was not interested,²² and Schopenhauer ended up translating Balthasar Gracian instead.

The young **Karl Marx** was a passionate devotee of Sterne, and when *he* was looking for a new project to distract him from his lectures in 1837, as Marx's most recent English-language biographer, Francis Wheen reports: "He dashed off a short 'humoristic novel', *Scorpion and Felix*, a nonsensical torrent of whimsy and persiflage that was all too obviously written under the spell of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*".²³ The Sternean impulse didn't disappear for Marx even after he abandoned his fledgling literary career, though. Five years later, in his very first contribution to the *Rheinische Zeitung*, published (anonymously) on his 24th birthday in May 1842, Marx tackles "die neueste preußische Zensurinstruktion" ["The Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction"], and complains among other things that it cramps his style:

Ich bin humoristisch, aber das Gesetz gebietet ernsthaft zu schreiben. Ich bin keck, aber das Gesetz befiehlt, daß mein Styl bescheiden sei. [...] Soll ferner die *Ernsthaftigkeit* nicht zu jener Definition des Tristram Shandy passen, wonach sie ein heuchlerisches Benehmen des Körpers ist, um die Mängel der Seele zu verdecken, sondern den *sachlichen* Ernst bedeuten, so hebt sich die ganze Vorschrift auf. Denn das Lächerliche behandle ich ernsthaft, wenn ich es lächerlich behandle, und die ernsthafteste Unbescheidenheit des Geistes ist, gegen die Unbescheidenheit bescheiden zu sein.²⁴

I am humorous, but the law bids me write seriously. I am audacious, but the law commands that my style be modest. [...] Further, if seriousness is not to come under Tristram Shandy's definition according to which it is a hypocritical behaviour of the body in order to conceal defects of the soul, but signifies seriousness *in substance*, then the entire prescription falls to the ground. For I treat the ludicrous seriously when I treat it ludicrously, and the most serious immodesty of the mind is to be modest in the face of immodesty.²⁵

In this paradox-courting paean to anti-gravity, the young Marx both lays explicit claim to a humorous, jocular style and posts an explicit allegiance to Sterne in this respect. As David Walsh points out, "the first significant literary reference in Marx's initial effort as a revolutionary journalist (his comments on the Prussian censorship in 1842) was drawn from Sterne's work".²⁶ Now scholars of Marx have known of his admiration for Sterne at least since the 1929 republication of this article in the first volume of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, which in turn was republished in the 1975 second edition, just in time to be cited, along with other references to Sterne in Marx's writings, in Siegbert Praver's classic

²² Rüdiger Safranski, *Schopenhauer und die wilden Jahre der Philosophie: Eine Biographie* (Munich: Hanser, 1987), 409.

²³ Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), 25.

²⁴ Karl Marx, "Bemerkungen über die neueste preußische Zensurinstruktion" (1842), *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, 2nd edn (Berlin: Dietz, 1975-), vol. 1/1, 100-1.

²⁵ Marx, "Comments on The Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction" (1842), trans. Clemens Dutt (*MECW* 1: 112-13).

²⁶ David Walsh, "Not a film review, properly speaking: Michael Winterbottom's *Tristram Shandy*", World Socialist Web Site, 16 March 2006

<<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/tris-m16.shtml>>.

1976 study of *Karl Marx and World Literature*.²⁷ Surprisingly, though, for all the immense amount of scholarly work that has been carried out on Marx, and for all the Marxist readings of Sterne, Marx's actual interest in Sterne has been neglected, and there is certainly still work to be done in simply tracing Marx's references and allusions to the novelist. For example, in June 1848, in his first contribution to the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx recycles this selfsame Sterne allusion (if this time unattributed) in order to poke fun at Ludolf Camphausen, newly appointed presidential chair of the Ministry of State in Berlin.²⁸ Then in his extended 1860 essay *Herr Vogt* Marx explicitly refers to *Tristram Shandy*'s chapter on noses;²⁹ elsewhere he uses the Shandean term "Steckenpferd" ("hobby-horse"),³⁰ and so on. There is not a huge amount of material, and Marx appears to confine himself to *Tristram Shandy*, for one thing, indeed to some of the most celebrated passages in it, but that is not to deny the evidently strategic importance of some of his references to Sterne, and of his programmatic confession of allegiance to Shandean humour.

When goes much further than this, though, with the deliberately provocative, irreverent contention that *Das Kapital* resembles nothing so much as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and needs to be read as an epic case study in Shandean humour writ large:

Like *Tristram Shandy*, *Capital* is full of systems and syllogisms, paradoxes and metaphysics, theories and hypotheses, abstruse explanations and whimsical tomfoolery. [...] To do justice to the deranged logic of capitalism, Marx's text is saturated, sometimes even waterlogged, with irony – an irony which has yet escaped almost every reader for more than a century.³¹

When's tongue is only partially in his cheek here, and it is an argument which has been hotly debated, but it seems to me that it at least has the value of usefully drawing attention to the rhetorical accomplishments of Marx's style, even if many are wont to dismiss such concerns as unduly aestheticising.

I'll move on next to another "master of suspicion", **Nietzsche**, for Paul de Man describes *Tristram Shandy* as "Nietzsche's favourite novel".³² Following the recommendation of Goethe, who had great admiration for Sterne's work, Nietzsche acquired *Tristram Shandy* at the tender age of fourteen – his sister had agreed to give it to him for his fifteenth birthday in October 1869, but he was impatient to get his hands on it and pestered her into getting it for him in advance.³³ Thus on 27 August 1859 we find in his diary:

²⁷ S. S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 15.

²⁸ Marx, "Camphausens Erklärung in der Sitzung vom 30. Mai", *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 3 (3 June 1848) (MEW 5: 25) / "Camphausen's Statement at the Session of May 30" (MECW 7: 30).

²⁹ Marx, *Herr Vogt* (MEW 14: 601 / MECW 17: 245).

³⁰ Cf. MEW 4, 192 (MECW 6: 221); MEW 14: 491 (MECW 17: 134).

³¹ When, *Karl Marx*, 308; cf. When, *Marx's "Das Kapital": A Biography* (London: Atlantic, 2007), 42.

³² Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 83.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Frühe Schriften*, ed. Hans Joachim Mette, 2nd edn, vol. 1 (Munich: dtv, 1994), 117, 119, 129, 151, 154f.

My *Tristram Shandy* has arrived. I'm reading the first volume at the moment, and I keep on re-reading it. At first I didn't understand most of it – in fact I was regretting having bought it. But now I feel tremendously attracted to it; I'm making a note of all the striking thoughts. I've never before come across such an all-round knowledge of the sciences [*Wissenschaften*], such a dissection of the heart [*Zergliederung des Herzens*].³⁴

Nietzsche's first comments on Sterne in print come a decade later, in the 1879 supplement to *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches: Ein Buch für freie Geister* (*Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*). Here, in section 223, he devotes an important section to eulogising Sterne, characterising him in superlative mode as:

Der freieste Schriftsteller. – Wie dürfte in einem Buche für freie Geister Lorenz Sterne ungenannt bleiben, er, den Goethe als den freiesten Geist seines Jahrhunderts geehrt hat! Möge er hier mit der Ehre fürlieb nehmen, der freieste Schriftsteller aller Zeiten genannt zu werden, in Vergleich mit welchem alle anderen steif, vierschrötig, unduldsam und bäurisch-geradezu erscheinen. An ihm dürfte nicht die geschlossene klare, sondern die "unendliche Melodie" gerühmt werden: wenn mit diesem Worte ein Stil der Kunst zu einem Namen kommt, bei dem die bestimmte Form fortwährend gebrochen, verschoben, in das Unbestimmte zurückübersetzt wird, so daß sie das eine und zugleich das andere bedeutet. Sterne ist der große Meister der *Zweideutigkeit* - dies Wort billigerweise viel weiter genommen als man gemeinhin tut, wenn man dabei an geschlechtliche Beziehungen denkt.

The Freest Writer. – How, in a book for free spirits, could there be no mention of Laurence [*Lorenz*] Sterne, whom Goethe honoured as the freest spirit of his century! Let him accept the honour here of being called the freest writer of all time [*der freieste Schriftsteller aller Zeiten*], in comparison with whom all others seem stiff, square, intolerant, and boorishly direct. What is to be praised in him is not the closed [*geschlossene*] and transparent but the "endless melody" [*"unendliche Melodie"*]: if by this term one means an artistic style in which determinate form is constantly being fractured, displaced [*verschoben*], translated back into the indeterminate, so that it signifies the one thing and the other at the same time. Sterne is the great master of *ambiguity* – taking this word, rightly, in a far wider sense than it is generally taken by those who are thinking of sexual relations.

With this description of Sterne, Nietzsche is deliberately harking back to Goethe's appraisal of the writer in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, and seeking to top it, although this emphasis on Sterne's "freedom" is also remarkably reminiscent of Hegel's evaluation in the *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* – and ironically so, for Hegel was a philosopher from whom Nietzsche was otherwise always very keen to distance himself. What's more, though, the term "unendliche Melodie" is, of course, Wagnerian, and Nietzsche goes on here to describe the effect of Sterne's style as similar to Wagner's music: "he produces in the right reader a feeling of uncertainty as to whether one is walking, standing, or lying: a feeling which is most akin to that of floating". For Sterne this is a dangerous association, though, for after Nietzsche's notorious break with Wagner Sterne's star then wanes along with Wagner's in the firmament that is Nietzsche's hierarchy of aesthetic values.

³⁴ Nietzsche, "Autobiographisches", 72.

In the autumn of 1884 Nietzsche begins to think of publishing a collection of his poems: his notebooks start to fill with workings and reworkings of poems and fragments, and among the many different ideas for unifying them in a cycle is to use Sterne's Yorick as a main character and entitle the collection "The New Yorick" ("Der neue Yorick")³⁵ – perhaps even with the subtitle "Songs of a Sentimental Journeyer" ("Lieder eines empfindsamen Reisenden").³⁶ This cycle would apparently have begun with the poems "How Yorick Became a Poet" and "Yorick in Venice", included further poems following our hero on his travels – "Yorick as Gypsy", "Yorick Among Glaciers", "Yorick Among Germans" – and concluded with "Yorick as Columbus". The cycle was never published, though (it eventually became the "Songs of Prince Vogelfrei" that were published with the second edition of *The Gay Science*), and by the end of Nietzsche's active career, in 1888, he is clearly treating his taste for Sterne as a youthful one which he has now overcome. In an early draft of *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche writes that "*Tristram Shandy* also belongs to my earliest favourites". Sterne did not live on in his affection, but even if one senses a tinge of wistfulness about this remark, the enduring fondness and sense of gratitude Nietzsche feels towards Sterne are unmistakable.

Sterne's Philosophical Reception in Germany, ii) Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Moving now into the twentieth century, we saw at the beginning of this essay how enthusiastically Walter Benjamin greeted Sterne, and another great Sterne admirer from the first half of the twentieth century was **Wittgenstein**. Two of Wittgenstein's friends have left accounts of his tastes in literature which demonstrate that he was very fond of Sterne (and specifically *Tristram Shandy*). Con Drury recalls a conversation he once had with Wittgenstein about "humorous books", when Wittgenstein revealed that he disliked *Don Quixote* and *Candide*, but – to Drury's slight surprise – liked P.G. Wodehouse and, precisely, Sterne, specifically *Tristram Shandy*. Wittgenstein is quoted as saying this:

Now a book I like greatly is Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. That is one of my favourite books. You remember the incident where they are discussing infant prodigies, and after several have mentioned examples, one of the company caps the lot by saying that he knew an infant who produced a work on the day he was born. Whereupon Dr Slop replies that it should have been wiped up and nothing more said about it. Now that you could say about a lot that is written today. They should be wiped up and nothing more said about them. I am particularly fond of the character of Corporal Trim in *Tristram Shandy*, and especially the sermon he reads out.³⁷

Another of Wittgenstein's friends, Theodore Redpath, reports similarly: "Among the novelists I remember Wittgenstein speaking of with enthusiasm were Sterne, Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Gottfried Keller. He told me he had read *Tristram Shandy* about a dozen times."³⁸ Redpath continues by speculating on how Wittgenstein might have come to like Sterne ("It could have been through his reading of Tolstoy, who was a strong admirer of both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*") and on why Wittgenstein might have liked Sterne: "Unfortunately I have forgotten any specific things he may have said to me about Sterne, but I could understand something of the appeal *Tristram Shandy* could have had

³⁵ Nietzsche, KGW VII/4/2, 205.

³⁶ Ibid., 210, 211, 214.

³⁷ M. O'C. [Maurice O'Connor] Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein", in Rush Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, 2nd edn (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1984), 133f.

³⁸ Theodore Redpath, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Student's Memoir* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 50.

for him: such as the preposterous conception of the whole book, the freedom and surprise of the writing, the whimsicality, the engagingness and vividness of the characters and the nimble and subtle wit.” We are all reduced to speculation on matters of this nature because Wittgenstein has covered his tracks and explicit traces of Sterne in his work – as of so many other writers and putative influences of various kinds – are obscured. If you search electronically through the Wittgenstein *Nachlass* in the online Bergen Archive then you find that the only references to “Sterne” are to stars (*Sterne* – a perennial problem for the electronic Sterne researcher in German!).

Beyond Redpath’s speculations, though, a few scholars have made more serious attempts to build on Wittgenstein’s professed preference and trace a Sternean impulse in Wittgenstein. Most notable among them is Beth Savickey, who in her book *Wittgenstein’s Art of Investigation* attempts to establish a case for Sterne’s influence on Wittgenstein’s “aware[ness] of the philosophical text as text” and on the style of the *Philosophische Untersuchungen*.³⁹ Of course beyond putative influences there is nothing to prevent scholars arguing for what they consider to be pertinent analogies between Sterne and Wittgenstein, as when Alfred Nordmann comments on Wittgenstein’s use of the subjunctive in the *Tractatus* by analogy with Sterne’s Walter Shandy expatiating on the white bear at the end of Volume V (ch. 43).⁴⁰ And this kind of analogy works in both directions, too, so as well as Sternean parallels in Wittgenstein one finds arguments for prefigurations of Wittgenstein in Sterne, as when Tony Nuttall claims: “There is a sort of embryonic Wittgenstein inside Sterne, who constantly emphasises those situations in which language is not a separable picture of the world, but rather a special mode of acting, or doing within the world. That this should happen anywhere in the eighteenth century is astounding”.⁴¹

Wittgenstein is not the only twentieth-century philosopher who has informed interpretations of Sterne’s novels, either. In one of the best known of these modern philosophical interpretations, James E. Swearingen reads Sterne through **Husserl and Heidegger**, as a precursor of the modern phenomenological tradition.⁴² Now Sterne was not exactly Heidegger’s kind of writer, and I have not found any references to Sterne in the *Gesamtausgabe* so far, but of course, as with Wittgenstein, that has not prevented a number of other commentators from establishing a relation between the writers, if only by using Sternean epigraphs for critical essays on Heidegger (e.g. William V. Spanos in one of the chapters of his *Heidegger and Criticism*),⁴³ or indeed vice-versa (Laurent Milesi uses a Heidegger epigraph in his contribution to the collection *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and*

³⁹ Beth Savickey, *Wittgenstein’s Art of Investigation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 122f.

⁴⁰ Alfred Nordmann, *Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus”: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 134-6.

⁴¹ A.D. Nuttall, *A Common Sky: Philosophy and the Literary Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), “*Tristram Shandy*”, 45-91 (here, 87f.).

⁴² James E. Swearingen, *Reflexivity in “Tristram Shandy”: An Essay in Phenomenological Criticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977); outside of the German tradition “proper”, cf. Donald R. Wehrs, “Sterne and Levinas: From the Ethics of the Face to the Aesthetics of Unrepresentability,” in Melvyn New (ed.), *Laurence Sterne: Critical Essays* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), 311-29.

⁴³ William V. Spanos, *Heidegger and Criticism: Retrieving the Cultural Politics of Destruction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 81.

Postmodernism).⁴⁴

Georg Lukács is an interesting case because he discusses Sterne at a number of points in his literary-critical output,⁴⁵ but one of his earliest published pieces is a fascinating fictionalised dialogue entitled “Reichtum, Chaos und Form: Ein Zwiegespräch über Lawrence Sterne” (“Wealth, Chaos and Form: A Dialogue on Laurence Sterne”), dated 1909 and published in Berlin in 1911 in his first book, the German-language essay collection *Die Seele und die Formen*. Here Lukács is keen to draw out the philosophical implications of Sterne’s work. One of the characters (Joachim) is critical of Sterne and wonders what Goethe would have made of the “Durcheinander heterogener Elemente” (“mess of heterogeneous elements”) in *Tristram Shandy*, but his interlocutor (Vincenz) defends Sterne and his fragmentary (chaotic), anti-totalising aesthetic: “nicht vom Zu-ende-denken ist hier die Rede, sondern vom Leben. Nicht von Systemen, sondern von neuen, sich niemals wiederholenden Wirklichkeiten” (“we’re talking here not about thinking-things-through-to-the-end, but about life. Not about systems, but about new realities that will never repeat themselves”).⁴⁶

I shall conclude this chronological sweep by focussing on a major figure from the end of the twentieth century who was also fascinated by the theoretical implications of Sterne’s formal innovations, specifically his anti-systematic bent, namely **Niklas Luhmann**. In *Liebe als Passion* (1982: *Love as Passion*), Luhmann describes the term “intimate relationships” as “a process [...] based on the supposition that the sum total of everything which goes to form an individual, his memories and attitudes, can never be accessible to someone else, if for no other reason than that the individual himself has no access to them (as can be seen from Tristram Shandy’s attempt to write his own biography).”⁴⁷ In his *Einführung in die Systemtheorie* (2002: *Introduction to Systems Theory*), Luhmann similarly gives Tristram’s inability to keep pace with describing the development of his own life in *Tristram Shandy* as a “famous example” (*berühmtes Beispiel*) of a feedback loop between communication (*Kommunikation*) and consciousness (*Bewußtsein*).⁴⁸ Luhmann cites *Tristram Shandy* on several other occasions, too, as an example of the way (to cite Hans-Georg Moeller’s summary): “A structured and non-chaotic reality is based on the reduction of complexity, on selection, on systemic observation”.⁴⁹ The most significant proponent of a system-theoretical interpretation of *Tristram Shandy* is not Luhmann himself, though, but his disciple Dietrich Schwanitz, who reads *Tristram Shandy* (which he calls “Luhmanns Lieblingsroman”, “Luhmann’s favourite novel”) through and with Luhmann in several contexts, highlighting

⁴⁴ Laurent Milesi, “‘Have you Not Forgotten to Wind up the Clock?’: Tristram Shandy and Jacques le fataliste on the (Post?)Modern Psychoanalytic Couch”, in David Pierce and Peter de Voogd (eds), *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), 179-95 (179).

⁴⁵ Cf. e.g. Georg Lukács, *Werke*, ed. Frank Benseler, vol. 7 (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1964), 340.

⁴⁶ Georg Lukács, “Reichtum, Chaos und Form: Ein Zwiegespräch über Lawrence Sterne”, in *Die Seele und die Formen* (Berlin: Egon Fleischel, 1911), 271, 276.

⁴⁷ Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge: Polity, 1986), 13.

⁴⁸ Niklas Luhmann, *Einführung in die Systemtheorie*, ed. Dirk Baecker, 2nd edn (Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme-Verlag, 2004), 263.

⁴⁹ Hans-Georg Moeller, *Luhmann Explained: From Souls to Systems* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006), 150.

the novel's self-reflexivity in particular.⁵⁰ In turn, though (in a perfect example of a scholarly feedback loop in practice), Luhmann cites Schwanitz's reading of the novel in his *Art as a Social System*.⁵¹

Conclusion

I don't think it would be controversial to claim that the leading lights of the German philosophical tradition have taken a keen interest (and, from the perspective of English-language philosophy, perhaps a surprisingly keen interest) in literary culture, and in Sterne in particular. Sterne has not been viewed as anything other than a major writer in Germany from the outset of his reception (unlike in England, where his reputation has been rather more changeable). For all his eccentricity he has nonetheless been viewed as (peripherally) central to the canon, as one of those writers one is simply obliged to encounter: a number of my writers have engaged with Sterne as students (for example Marx and Benjamin), or even before, during their schooldays (for example Nietzsche). Good German translations – especially the canonical versions of the two novels by Bode – in cheap, popular editions (including English-language editions for use primarily in schools), have kept Sterne in the limelight (and in press!) from the 1760s to the present in Germany. It is undoubtedly true that German philosophers have taken a rather different kind of interest in Sterne than their literary counterparts. Naturally enough they have been less interested, on the whole, in Sterne's contribution to the development of the novel, which is clearly less directly relevant to their own writing practice. That said, though, Sterne's style in general (and in all the languages in which he has been encountered) has proved highly influential because it is so highly infectious. **Stylistic mimeticism** has always been widespread among the German literary writers who have fallen under Sterne's spell (including even Goethe in the early years of his contact with Sterne), and superior philosophical stylists such as Schopenhauer, Marx, Nietzsche and the early Lukács have also succumbed to the temptation to imitate surface features of the style (the self-reflexivity, whimsicality, indirections, digressivity, etc.). A writer like Luhmann, though, begins with a formal, structural consideration (or set of considerations) and achieves significant philosophical mileage out of it.

The most interesting cases arise, then, when philosophers have spent time reflecting on Sterne's thematic concerns as well as his formal innovations, and I'd like to isolate three main areas here. The discourse of philosophical Sterne reception was dominated at first by conceptions of his **originality and genius**, and this was primarily because Sterne was so little like the other (English) novelists to whom German writers had access at the time. This is not merely a stylistic consideration, though, for again it is linked into substantive philosophical questions from the beginning, and Sterne is linked into conceptions of individualism and individuality derived perhaps from Locke but taken to extremes of hobby-horsical peculiarity (*Eigenheit* or *Eigentümlichkeit* in German, a term which frequently recurs in German-language discussions of Sterne, not least Goethe's). Another, second, strand in the early interest in Sterne was as a **sentimentalist and moralist** (*A Sentimental Journey* was received

⁵⁰ Cf. e.g. Dietrich Schwanitz, "Zeit und Geschichte im Roman, Interaktion und Gesellschaft im Drama: zur wechselseitigen Erhellung von Systemtheorie und Literatur", in Dirk Baecker et al. (eds), *Theorie als Passion: Niklas Luhmann zum 60. Geburtstag* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 181-213.

⁵¹ Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 328 n. 74: "According to the well-known presentation of this problem in Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the intervening narrator must be distinguished from the narrator who narrates the narrator's intervention."

earlier, and more enthusiastically, in Germany than *Tristram Shandy*), and this strain persisted at least as late as Nietzsche, but more sophisticated conceptions of Sternean irony and narrative perspective led to a more modern appreciation of the epistemological implications of a qualified narrative perspective. Thirdly, then, key German aesthetic thinkers – from Schiller and Hegel in the Romantic period to Lukács in the twentieth century and beyond – have taken an interest in Sterne’s contribution to the **development of the comic novel**, and by extension in theorising “Shandyan humour” (*Humor*), distinguishing it from (learned) wit (*Witz*) and satire – especially once decent home-grown German imitators of Sterne like “the German Sterne”, Jean Paul, became available for comparison and contrast.

Now I certainly don’t want to give the impression that Sterne was universally loved. Of course there are many philosophers who I have not mentioned here who weren’t influenced by Sterne, weren’t interested in his novels or even aware of him – usually because they just preferred other writers rather than because they had no interest in literature at all (for example Friedrich Schlegel was critical of Sterne because he preferred Jean Paul). I’ll conclude with a brief typology, though, which breaks down the corpus of thinkers who I have included in this survey into three categories, in ascending order of interest. First, in some cases, there is no traceable interest in Sterne but scholars have nonetheless applied their philosophical insights to an interpretation of Sterne’s work (as with Swearingen using **Husserl and Heidegger**). Second, in some cases the interest in Sterne is genuine and demonstrable but secondary to the main philosophical activity. I’m thinking here of **Schopenhauer, Benjamin and Wittgenstein** who clearly took great pleasure from their reading of Sterne, yet it is not at all obvious how this Sternean impulse relates to their philosophical work, and whether one might call it in any genuine sense “Sternean”. Third, in some cases, though, and these have been the most interesting for my purposes, the enthusiasm for Sterne has proved genuinely philosophically productive, if to a greater or lesser extent: more tentatively in **Kant and Hegel**, then more expansively and generously in **Marx, Nietzsche** and, most recently, **Luhmann**.