“What a Beast Man Is”: Animals in Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey

It is upon the conviction of “what a Beast man is” that Tristram asks Maria what resemblance she finds between her goat and himself (Sterne, Tristram 9.24.574). Man’s place in the animal kingdom, although a fact expressible in such a simple phrase as that said by Tristram, has nevertheless problematized humanity’s search to define exactly what it is that distinguishes us from other animals—what it is that makes us human. This process of identification has important repercussions, for it affects our interactions not only with the other species on the planet, but also amongst ourselves. In establishing what is human, we place limits and direct our assessment of the value others may have in accordance to how “human” they are. In the middle of the eighteenth century, a culture of sensibility began to develop and gain prominence in the Western world, a fact reflected in the parallel rise of the sentimental genre in literature, “a transnational literary form” (Cohen 107), which would have its heyday for the following century. The basic precepts of sentimentalism were “the definition of virtue in terms of … sympathetic fellow-feeling and the philanthropic attitude it was held to promote … and the anti-stoical convention that the tender passions should be nurtured rather than repressed”, (Keymer 85). This expansive sympathetic feeling promoted by sentimentalism included animals in its scope, thus entering in conflict with a more anthropocentric stance towards them. Laurence Sterne, true to the Shandean ambiguity prevalent in much of his work, in his The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (1759-1767), and A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy (1768) displays elements from both of these ideologies. In this study I will briefly examine the development of these two worldviews regarding the status of animals, and their respective ramifications on human identity, in the aforementioned texts. In doing so, I will demonstrate how these two texts, through their

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fluctuation between these two viewpoints, undermine the traditional barrier we place between animals and ourselves, and in giving us no easy answer they encourage us to critically reassess our attitudes towards them.

Asses, from the time of Aesop’s fables, have for the most part not held a very esteemed position in Western culture. In *Tristram Shandy*, some of their representations reveal the anthropocentric rejection of that which it conceives to be the unfortunate animal facets of man: the corporeal, the sexual and the feminine. Walter Shandy, in taking up St. Hilarion’s metaphor of the body as an ass, exemplifies both the equivalency drawn between the animal and the corporeal, and the deprecatory attitude shown towards them. The origins of the devaluation of the body may be traced through the recurrent dichotomy in Western thought between matter and spirit, or body and mind. If Western culture has long held, since the time of Aristotle, that our faculty of reasoning is what is exclusive to humanity—then it should be no surprise that the notions of mind and spirit, identified as the intangible origins of this abstract capability, are given a greater value in an anthropocentric worldview. Symbolically, there is perhaps no animal more apt than the ass to serve as a paragon of the degrading attitude towards animals owing to this difference. To make an ass of oneself, an idiom present since the seventeenth century, is “to behave absurdly”, that is to act as if one had no reason (“ass, n.1”). Thus, the obsessively rationalising Walter has found the ideal animal to express his contempt for what he conceives to be the non-rational animal component of man.

Yet, the ass is not only made semantically equivalent with the body in *Tristram Shandy*, but also with the passions and in particular those of a sexual nature. The explicit connection between asses and passions is made through Walter’s substitution of the latter with the former. The erotic nature of these passions, on the other hand, is suggested both in the context of St. Hilarion’s chiefly carnal temptations in the desert, and in the courtship of
widow Wadman by uncle Toby. Walter’s disdain for sexual desire, and the connection it has with the animal aspect of humans, can also be appreciated later on in *Tristram Shandy* in his diatribe against it as the basis of the propagation of the species: “a passion … which couples and equals wise men with fools, and makes us come out of our caverns and hiding-places more like satyrs and four-footed beasts than men” (9.33.586-587); lust dehumanises humans in Walter’s eyes. Depriving them of the reason that is essential for their human state, sexual desire displaces men from their place at the top of the “natural” hierarchy and degrades them to the lower states occupied by animals and hybrids such as satyrs, who further blur the line between the human and the animal. The debasement of men due to their sexual passions is also present in Slawkenbergius’ account of how women choose husbands—told through imagery where the men are asses with panniers. Stripped of their humanity and transformed into beasts that are slaves to the base impulses of their body, men find themselves under the dominion of women.

Up to this point, I have employed the term anthropocentric to describe this worldview that shuns reminders that humans are animals, or that imperil man’s status as the culmination and lord of nature. Nevertheless, the conceptualisation of animals in this worldview in Sterne’s context, and even unfortunately till this day, also helps to create an interspecies hierarchy in which men are more “human” than women. Thus, the anthropocentric position being analysed in these two texts can also be considered, more specifically, an androcentric one. Women’s relationship to nature is emphasised in how they are the ones at fault, in Walter’s androcentrism, for inciting sexual passions in men: in his eyes, the devil is in women and they are responsible for the unruly appetite to which he attributes “every evil and disorder in the world of what kind or nature soever” (Sterne, *Tristram* 9.32.586). In this manner, women more than men, embody the sexual, corporeal and the animal. Consequently, I would go even one step further in Elizabeth W. Harries’ analysis that Walter’s “fear of the feminine
and fear of the flesh have fused to become one overriding fear, a fear of and even contempt for his sexuality” (118), for these three fears are part of a larger fear and disdain towards the animal.

The association of the feminine with the animal is also present in the polysemy of the word “hobby-horse”. Among its many meanings, besides that of a favourite pursuit embodied as a horse in Sterne’s text, there is that of “a lustful person; a loose woman, prostitute” (“hobby-horse, n.”). As a result, despite what Tristram might say, perhaps there is not much difference between his use of the word hobby-horse and Walter’s ass. This idea is supported when we observe how Tristram refers to the hobby-horse in this passage: “When a man gives himself up to the government of a ruling passion—or in other words, when his HOBBY-HORSE grows head-strong—farewell cool reason and fair discretion!” (2.5.83). Just like Walter’s ass, the hobby-horse is a passion which overthrows reason. Furthermore, a sexual connotation is also bestowed upon the word when Tristram comments that “a man’s HOBBY-HORSE is as tender a part as he has about him”, and that a blow to one’s hobby-horse also hit the rider “in the most dishonourable part a blow could fall” (2.12.101; 6.31.413). Thus, a semantic connection is made between hobby-horses and men’s groins, a link which suggests that the origins of hobby-horsical passions are of a sexual nature. In this manner, the difference between hobby-horse and asses becomes even more blurred for Walter “might be said truly, to have been upon the bones, or the back of his own ass, or else of some other man’s” during all the time that he interchanged the word “passions” with “ass” (8.31.530). The shared sexual stimuli behind the use of the words “hobby-horse” and “ass” exemplify, in the words of Ruth Perry, “the continuity and interchangeability” between the realms of language and sex in Tristram Shandy (27). Expanding upon Perry’s Lacanian analysis in which language “mediates and contains original desire” (28), hobby-horses and Walter’s ass become outlet points for the unconscious’ desire for that which it is alienated from due to
societal restraints. In the case of hobby-horses, this idea is reinforced when we consider that “all the male characters characteristically attempt to avoid, negate, or even take over the female and the maternal, concentrating … on their varied but absorbing hobby-horses” (Harries 119). Hobby-horses, therefore, serve as channel to redirect the desire for the feminine and sexual which is derided by an androcentric viewpoint. Consequently, Walter’s ass and the hobby-horses in Tristram Shandy show the futility in the efforts of men to distance themselves from the animal, corporeal, feminine and sexual facets of their being; men cannot ride through life without them.

Yet, asses in Tristram Shandy are also subject to the sentimental trend of the era, as can be appreciated in Tristram’s own opinion and behaviour towards them. Unlike his father, Tristram has a predilection for the ass compared to other animals; it is an animal he cannot bear to strike since “there is a patient endurance of sufferings, wrote so unaffectedly in his looks and carriage” that it always disarms him (Sterne, Tristram 7.32.470). Tristram’s response to the ass’s body language highlights one of the characteristics of sentimentalism: the importance of communication at a non-verbal level. Many thinkers of the time believed that gestures and bodily expression were a means of universal communication; this belief is apparent in the following excerpt from Henry Home, Lord Kames’ second volume of the Elements of Criticism (1762): “The natural signs of emotions, voluntary and involuntary, being nearly the same in all men, form an universal language … a passage to the heart” (434-435). Sentimentalism values this form of communication for its capability to establish a direct link between people’s emotions, thus facilitating the sympathy it seeks to cultivate—a sympathy that at the time is viewed by individuals such as Hume as “the chief source of moral distinctions” (618). Furthermore, the basis of this communication upon the body and the emotions allows animals to be included in its scope, and therefore also reflects a shift in attitude towards animals. This non-verbal, “natural” communication is given its value and
place alongside the artificial languages of men, product of “reason”. Sentimentalism thereby welcomes and even fosters this common ground with animals.

In Tristram’s encounter with the ass outside the inn at Lyons, sentimentalism’s levelling tendency towards the human-animal relationship can also be appreciated in the status he confers to the ass. Tristram comments that whether the ass be in “liberty or bondage” (7.32.470), he always has something civil to say to it. In the alternative of the ass being in bondage, Tristram is implying that the ass’ status under man is that of a slave. Moreover, the undesirable status of servitude is emphasised in how Tristram describes the life of the ass: “many a bitter day’s labour—and many a bitter blow, I fear, for its wages—‘tis all—all bitterness to thee” (7.32.471). This conception of human ownership of animals is a far cry from the anthropocentric objectification of animals—a viewpoint where animals are seen as placed on Earth for the benefit of mankind. Under sentimentalism, animals assume the position of fellow creatures who share the world with humans, and who are subjects capable of benefiting from liberty and suffering under servitude.

The fellow feeling towards animals fostered by sentimentalism finds its maximum expression in the two episodes concerning flies in *Tristram Shandy*. In the episode of uncle Toby and the fly, the reader can appreciate sentimentalism at its best: a sympathetic feeling conducive to action, and not simply lost in an emotional response. In fact, uncle Toby demonstrates how this universal benevolence is not necessarily dependent on an intense emotional link between the participants—being a fellow creature on Earth is link enough. Toby is given no incentive to form a direct sympathetic connection with fly, on the contrary, he is given reason to be hostile to it: the fly has tormented him cruelly all through dinnertime. Furthermore, after “infinite attempts” (Sterne, *Tristram* 2.12.100), Toby captures the fly. With the fly in his power, and with reason enough to assert his dominance and importance over the fly, Toby opts for cohabitation and lets it out the window for “this world surely is wide
enough” to hold both him and the fly (Sterne, *Tristram* 2.12.100). The fellow feeling Toby feels with the fly not only motivates his benevolent action, but also serves as a “lesson of universal good-will” for Tristram—having a far greater effect on him than any he states by the *Tristra-pedia* (Sterne, *Tristram* 2.12.100). A similar event occurs with the poor negro girl who flaps away flies instead of killing them. Attitudes towards slaves and animals converge once again in *Tristram Shandy* as uncle Toby tells the following to Trim: “she had suffered persecution … and had learnt mercy” (9.6.552). Animals are made, like slaves, the subject of persecution. Nevertheless, sentimentalism in the passage of the negro girl also acquires colonialist undertones. To be merciful towards someone else, one must have more power than the other and recognise their inferiority. Whilst such awareness could lead one to act against the power structures that create such a difference in status, there is also the possibility that it will lead one to believe in one’s superiority and in the helplessness of the other—a belief that would recommend them to one’s protection, as uncle Toby might say. Applied particularly to the case of slaves and animals, sentimentalism shows its potential to simply serve as a disguised form of moral self-gratification—one that ultimately ends up in simply reaffirming inequalities in power and status.

The potential deficiencies of the sentimental position towards animals become more apparent in the caged starling episode in *A Sentimental Journey*. The episode begins well for the starling, with Yorick declaring that he will let it out “cost what it will” (651). Unfortunately for the starling, the fact that the cage’s door is twisted fast with wire proves to be too high a cost for Yorick’s determination. Furthermore, Yorick proves to be forgetful of his initial impulse to free the bird; later on when La Fleur buys the starling for him, instead of freeing him, Yorick continues to hold onto him, and once back in England, he passes him on to another owner. The starling’s repertoire, instead of helping it achieve its freedom, turns it into a valuable commodity to be passed around. In this manner, Yorick’s initial impulse
proves to be the product of his own emotional turmoil at the thought of being imprisoned, rather than an actual sympathetic reaching out towards the starling. Thus, the self-consciousness regarding one’s feelings that sentimentalism promotes runs the risk of becoming mere inactive self-absorption.

Nevertheless, in Yorick’s burst of emotion with the starling, the political nature of sentimentalism can also be appreciated. Sentimentalism, as Tobias Menely notes, is often seen as a form of “political utopianism” or “quixotism” by its critics since it radically reconceives “civil relationships and collective obligations by disclosing the voices and interests of marginalized social subjects” (Menely 245, 246). In the starling episode, Yorick is aware that the starling’s words are said due to mere imitation “yet so true in tune to nature were they chanted that in one moment they overthrew all my systematic reasoning upon the Bastile” (Sterne, *Sentimental* 651). The reason the starling’s words are so true to nature is due to the fact that “disguise thyself as thou wilt, still slavery! … still thou art a bitter draught” (Sterne, *Sentimental* 651). Slavery conceived as a universal human wrong is an idea that will not unsettle a modern reader, most of us will actually be in agreement—what is radical, however, is that this principle is also extended to our relationship with animals. It is a caged starling, not a human slave, which elicits the aforementioned reaction from Yorick. Therefore, sentimentalism casts a shadow of doubt over pet-owners, and over society’s exploitation of animals in general, causing us to consider whether our relationship with animals may actually be that of master and slave. Furthermore, the absolutism of sentimentalism present in the starling passage, the belief in a natural right to liberty, also demonstrates the risk of using reason perversely to try and justify or disguise its violation. In this manner, sentimentalism in the starling episode demonstrates how it advocates for a profound reformulation of our relationship with animals—although Yorick’s behaviour shows that its proposals are rarely put into action.
The possible shortfalls of sentimentalism towards animals are also present in Tristram’s encounter with the ass at Lyons, and the dead ass episode in *A Sentimental Journey*. Despite the sympathy he shows towards the ass at the entrance of the inn, Tristram admits to being compelled more by the “pleasantry in the conceit, of seeing how an ass would eat a macaroon—than of benevolence in giving him one” (Sterne, *Tristram* 7.32.472). Self-interest prevails over compassion as a motive for offering the ass a macaroon. The reader is thus forced to question the depth and sincerity of Tristram’s sympathetic connection with the ass, and if sentimentalism is not merely a morally comforting way to hide one’s self-interest. On the other hand, Yorick in the dead ass episode demonstrates that sympathy does have limits. At the end of “The Dead Ass” chapter, Yorick ends with stating the following: “Did we love each other, as this poor soul but loved his ass—’twould be something.—” (623). Geneviève Van de Merghel suggests that Yorick trails off for “he cannot imagine the consequences of this radical speculation and he trails off into silence” (82). I concur with her, for in the following chapter, “The Postillion”, Yorick thirsts for “grave and quiet moments” as he attempts to continue contemplating the mourner’s story (Sterne, *Sentimental* 623). Nonetheless, the rowdy ride disrupts Yorick’s concentration and he is unable to resume his thoughts on the episode—unable, in other words, to fully understand the mourner’s bond with the dead ass. To conceive of mourning over one’s dead ass, as if one were mourning over one’s dead child, is a task too formidable for Yorick’s sympathy.

Yet, where Yorick fails in imagining such a strong bond with an animal—the mourner proves it possible. When La Fleur offers him some money, the man refuses answering: “it was not the value of the ass—but the loss of him” (622). For the mourner, the ass is not a commodity for which he can be monetarily compensated; the ass has acquired the status of a person in being unique and thus irreplaceable. Moreover, the ass’ death has spurred him to consider whether the weight of himself and his afflictions have “shortened the poor creature’s
days” (Sterne, *Sentimental* 622), and he fears they have indeed. Therefore, his grief does not only bring an outpouring of tears, it also fosters an active reassessment of his previous role as the ass’ master. If the mourner’s grief is ridiculous, then the humour lies in the impossibility of an ass—of all animals—inspiring such feelings in a human being. What the joke reveals then, as Van de Merghel points out in examining one critic’s humorous interpretation of the episode, is the discomfort that arises from the fact “that animals are equated with humans” (83). If one can only laugh at the dead ass episode, then it is because one cannot—or does not want to contemplate the possibility of an animal meriting a similar emotional response to that given to a human.

In conclusion, Sterne steers the reader away from an anthropocentric posture towards animals, but he does not recklessly prescribe the reader to adopt a sentimental viewpoint either. Perhaps one of Sterne’s greatest abilities, and one which manifests itself in *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* in the manner in which he depicts animals, is his capacity to pull the rug from under the readers’ feet—unsettling any notions or expectations they may have brought to the text, and any they may form during the process of reading it. Walter Shandy, in his use of the word ass, condenses his repudiation of the animal, corporeal, sexual and feminine facets of men—yet not for that reason can one simply say that androcentrism characterises *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne shows that for all his theorising and reasoning, Walter must ride an ass or hobby-horse like the rest of us—he cannot avoid these facets of his being manifesting themselves one way or another. The alternative presented to us, sentimentalism, revalues the common characteristics we share with animals. Thus, for instance, the breach between humans and animals begins to close through the possibility of meaningful communication through gesture and bodily expressions. Sentimentalism has its highest moment in *Tristram Shandy* in the incident with uncle Toby and the fly; it demonstrates its potential to motivate disinterested action and for such action to inspire more benevolence.
Nevertheless, Sterne also makes the reader quite aware of the possible shortcomings of sentimentalism: the risk of the individual remaining at inactive self-absorption; the danger of being nothing more than a morally reassuring disguise for self-interest, and the reality that sometimes sympathy cannot be successfully established. Therefore, instead of a bridge, sentimentalism can just as easily continue to isolate us from animals, fostering a passive complacency instead of action to change the status quo. Yet, these satiric veins in Sterne’s representation of sentimentalism towards animals do not mean that we should just casually dismiss it with a laugh. The greatest ramification of Sterne’s ability to unsettle us from our comfort zones, offering neither a clear solution nor position to take, is that he encourages us to think. So, unlike Yorick, let us not desist in thinking through what our relationship with animals is or should be merely because the journey is rough. And, more importantly, let us choose to act on whatever conclusions we come to.
Works Consulted


